INSTRUCTOR-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS AND ATTRITION RATES AMONG STUDENTS ENROLLED IN DEVELOPMENTAL ASYNCHRONOUS ONLINE COURSES

By

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Abstract

Most universities and colleges offer the option of online courses, but there is concern over the high student attrition rates in these courses. The dropout rate within the online environment, especially those enrolled in developmental courses, is significantly higher than that of face-to-face courses. Students taking developmental online courses struggle with the same challenges as the traditional college student, but they often have a more demanding personal schedule, lower self-confidence, and are often confused by the online environment (Croxton, 2014; Gaytan, 2015). Each of these struggles strongly influences student attrition and must be overcome to ensure course completion. Although there is literature focusing on the attrition rates of online courses, very little takes the student perspective into account, and whether student-teacher relationships in developmental asynchronous courses can be linked to course satisfaction leading to persistence. This study examined whether a relationship between the instructor and the student might build self-determination in students, help them through their challenges, and possibly lower the attrition rates among students enrolled in developmental asynchronous online courses at the University of Alaska. This study followed a qualitative approach specifically using the phenomenological methodology using individual interviews of 30 students who had been previously enrolled in developmental asynchronous online courses. Three themes emerged as central to student dissatisfaction: the instructor's lack of communication, not being personable with students, and a confusing and complicated course structure. This study is significant in that it helps institutions better understand their need to take an active role to encourage student persistence.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction to the Problem

With the Internet entering the arena of higher education, courses are often taught outside of a "brick and mortar" classroom. This type of course, taught and often referred to as an online course, is a way to educate students with instruction and content delivered primarily over the Internet with little, if any, face-to-face meetings (Dalton, 2012; Staker & Horn, 2012; Watson, Winograd, & Kalmon, 2004). The number of students enrolled in online courses continues to grow each year with over 29.7% of students in higher education taking at least one online course in 2015 (Allen & Seaman, 2017).

Asynchronous courses are an especially attractive type of online learning option for students. This online course format has no face-to-face meetings and instructors provide students access to materials anytime (Rodriguez, 2015). Asynchronous courses are often an option for students struggling to move to a college campus because of family and community responsibilities as well as scheduling conflicts. Not only do these courses offer students the opportunity to take classes online, they allow accessibility anytime, from anywhere (Lowenthal, 2015; Northey, Bucic, Chylinski, & Govind, 2015).

Another attraction for asynchronous online education among university students appears to center around busy schedules. Students enter the online domain because it is convenient, adaptable, and immediately accessible (Buxton, 2014; Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012). In fact, some students have been shown to prefer the asynchronous method of online courses over synchronous courses, courses that meet online in real time on a regular basis, because of the freedom in scheduling (Costley & Lange, 2016; Coy, Marino, & Serianni, 2014).

Although the asynchronous online environment appears the perfect solution for busy students, many students do not remain enrolled to completion. The reasons for online course dropout rates, or attrition rates, have been grouped by some researchers into three categories: environmental or external factors, student or internal factors, and curriculum (Croxton, 2014; Hart, 2012; Lee & Choi, 2010). Many students drop courses based on external commitments such as jobs and family as well as internal struggles like low self-confidence, low self-efficacy, and motivational struggles (Gaytan, 2015; Park, 2007). Finally, if the curriculum and web-based instructions are confusing, work is complicated, or students struggle with both lack of community and isolation from the instructor, they will often drop the course (Croxton, 2014; Hart, 2012). Especially vulnerable to dropping out of asynchronous online courses are those underprepared for college level work (Travers, 2016).

As students begin their college careers, many find they have not been adequately prepared for the rigors of college level courses. Because they lack the skills necessary to perform college level work, these students must take developmental courses, defined as preparatory courses below the 100 level (Jaggars & Bailey, 2010; Jaggars, Hodara, & Stacey, 2013; Jaggars & Stacey, 2014). These courses help students build academic skills to better prepare them for college level courses.

With the limited time and heavy responsibilities many students in developmental courses have to manage, attending classes on campus can be very difficult. Taking developmental courses using the asynchronous format allows these students the opportunity to take courses and schedule them around other commitments.

However, students struggle to remain enrolled in these classes to completion. Persisting through a course is a challenge in the face-to-face environment but is often more difficult for

students taking these courses asynchronously online. In fact, developmental online courses appear to have a higher attrition rate than the same courses in the face-to-face environment (Crawford & Persaud, 2013; Xu & Jaggars, 2011).

In summary, many students enrolled in developmental asynchronous online courses struggle with a demanding personal schedule, low self-confidence because of the lack of academic skills, and an often confusing online environment. Each of these struggles strongly influences student attrition and must be overcome to ensure course completion.

Background of the Study

Some students welcome the option of the asynchronous online environment, especially the large population of nontraditional students attending college (Castillo, 2013; Jaggars, Edgecombe, & Stacey, 2013). Kim (2002) defines a nontraditional student as having at least one of the following factors: part-time student, works a full-time job, is financially independent of parental support, has dependents other than a spouse, is a single parent, is delayed in their postsecondary enrollment, or has no high school diploma. Online courses offer these nontraditional students the flexibility of scheduling their course work around other commitments allowing students to ask questions and complete work whenever they have time, and with the use of technology, wherever they may be (Chen & deNoyelles, 2013). Because of the opportunity to both time shift and place shift, students who otherwise would not be able to take courses find it possible to do so.

Other students are attracted to online courses as well. These students include those with disabilities (Bastedo & Vargas, 2014; Serianni & Coy, 2014; Woods, Maiden, & Brandes, 2011), those who live in remote locations (Barbour, 2013; Owens, Hardcastle, & Richardson, 2009; Xu & Jaggars, 2013), those in the military (Starr-Glass, 2013; Wilson & Smith, 2012), and parents

who are trying to balance several roles and demands of life and want to continue their education in the midst of heavy family and financial loads (Kramarae, 2003; Watson & Gemin, 2008; Yukselturk & Top, 2013).

Student Retention

As the popularity of online courses continues to grow, so do the challenges for students, instructors, and universities. One challenge is to help students remain enrolled. The attrition rate at both colleges and universities, defined as leaving without a grade for the class in which the student is registered (Hart, 2012; Tinto, 1987), has been a continuing concern for educators. Allen and Seaman (2014) note that the attrition rate in online courses is much higher than the rate in face-to-face courses and is a major barrier to online education growth. In fact, the dropout rate in online courses is often higher than what is documented because many students do not officially withdraw from a course and therefore no record of attrition exists. Oftentimes students will stop completing work during the semester and remain enrolled, taking a grade of "F" rather than withdrawing.

Low Retention Factors

Many factors work together in students' lives to make it difficult to complete an online course. The three factors identified, (a) environmental, (b) student, and (c) curriculum need further exploration.

Environmental factors. In the online setting, environmental factors, defined as time constraints, family responsibilities, community obligations, life circumstances, and work commitments outside of the college environment are struggles some students often deal with unbeknownst to the instructor and the university (Castillo, 2013; McMahon, 2013; Park, 2007). When external challenges come up, making the college workload overwhelming, a student may

officially withdraw from the course, or the student might stop submitting work or being involved at any level. It seems the very reasons students register for online courses; family responsibilities, job commitments, and a busy schedule, are some of the same reasons students drop out (Willging & Johnson, 2009).

There are typically a variety of responsibilities competing for time that affect a student's ability to succeed. Online learners usually place their academic obligations as just one of the myriad of undertakings in their social world's priority structure. When this happens, family and job responsibilities often take precedence over academics and the student drops out (Cochran, Campbell, Baker, & Leeds, 2013; Helms, 2014; McMahon, 2013).

Student factors. A second factor leading to student retention is the internal, or student factor. This includes past online course experience and educational background, as well as a student's locus of control, self-efficacy, motivation, and self-regulation. These factors all fall under the broad umbrella of self-directed learning. Students who take online courses assume greater responsibility for their learning but oftentimes have not been taught the skills necessary to undertake this responsibility and need additional support to succeed in online courses (Xu & Jaggars, 2014). According to Lee and Choi (2010), up to 55% of those dropping out of online courses attribute student factors as the primary reason. Their findings indicate that a poor academic aptitude and lack of academic performance skills are related to lower persistence in online courses. Students with low academic aptitude and a history of poor performance in classes are more likely to enroll in online courses but less likely to persist. It was also discovered that students with poor academic and technical skills struggled to persist in online courses. These students not only lacked the ability to manage time but were unfamiliar with the skills to use computer technology effectively (Lee & Choi, 2010).

Curriculum factors. Curriculum is the third major factor that has been shown to determine course retention. Curriculum has been defined as "a planned educational experience" (Kern, Thomas, Howard, & Bass, 1998, p. 1) and includes not only the textbook and other course materials for the class, but all that occurs in the classroom experience.

Because the definition of curriculum envelops all that happens in the course environment, its influence on students is far reaching. The syllabus, website, online tools, and instructor/student communication factor into the educational experience and determine course satisfaction (Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012; Tobin, 2014). If students are unsatisfied with any part of the curriculum, motivation wanes and course completion may be compromised.

Students in Developmental Courses

Especially vulnerable to dropping out of online courses offered in higher education are those enrolled in developmental courses. Students in developmental online courses often remember past difficulties and failures when attempting these courses in high school. Older students who have forgotten lessons learned long ago are placed in courses they are sure they passed in earlier years (Castillo, 2013; Jantz, 2010). Students from other cultures often struggle with language barriers and a different way of thinking than was passed down to them (Crisp & Delgado, 2014). Although they are good students, they must take developmental courses to build their English verbal and writing skills. Students who lack the educational background often start out discouraged when they are told they cannot do the work of a college student (Castillo, 2013). Therefore, many of these students have low self-efficacy, a belief in their capability to succeed (Bandura, 1997), and lack the faith they can succeed in school. In all cases, students in developmental classes have been tested and were told they are not prepared for college level courses and must start their college education many courses behind other students.

This has been the case for many of the students attending the University of Alaska Statewide system (UA Institutional Research, Planning, and Analysis, 2016).

In 2015, the percentage of incoming first year students taking at least one developmental course in one of the institutions that make up the University of Alaska was 46.3% (UA Institutional Research, Planning, and Analysis, 2016). This means almost half the students beginning their first year of college were required to enroll in courses with very high student attrition rates. Further compounding the student struggle is that many of the developmental courses offered online at the University of Alaska are in the asynchronous format removing them from the accountability of a face-to-face relationship between student and instructor.

Finally, those taking developmental classes in the asynchronous online environment oftentimes encounter (a) the struggle of using technology to communicate with other students and with the instructor, (b) difficulty in navigating unfamiliar online territory, (c) struggles with limited Internet access, and (d) being self-motivated to push themselves through their academic difficulties.

When students enroll in an asynchronous online course, even with the barriers they might face, they are motivated to take the first step to meet their needs through education. Each student begins the course with a desire to complete or to persist to the end of the course. But oftentimes, the struggles encountered make persisting to course completion difficult.

Persistence

Barriers to persistence often include ineffective or incomplete communication between the instructor and the student. Students often become frustrated with the instructor for providing slow feedback, difficulty when contacting the instructor, changes in course requirements and due dates, and limited communication (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012).

The absence of meaningful social contacts with the instructor increases the chances of social isolation for the student and is a main factor of student dissatisfaction (Ali & Smith, 2015). This lack of "nearness" or "closeness" between the student and instructor was found to be a key reason for withdrawal from an online course (Borup, West, & Graham, 2012; Lee & Choi, 2010). Persistence then, can be highly attributed to the students' satisfaction with the instructor and the students' social relationship in the online environment (Hart, 2012).

Teacher Social Presence

Teacher social presence is the 'visibility' of the instructor in the online classroom which helps to facilitate and direct learning (Baker, 2010; Costley & Lange, 2016). As the teacher focuses on creating and maintaining a learning environment that encourages student participation and communication (Costley & Lange, 2016), this presence facilitates the overall social presence of the classroom community and has been found to predict student connectedness and satisfaction in online courses (Hart, 2012; Rodriguez, 2015; Wise, Chang, Duffy, & del Valle, 2004). In fact, Rodriguez (2015) found that instructor interaction led to more student satisfaction of online courses than peer communication. The lack of teacher social presence then, appears to be a likely reason for the lack of motivation to study, and a high level of student frustration (Hart, 2012).

Although there is extensive research using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies investigating why students drop out of developmental online courses as well as what "best practices" are necessary to encourage persistence, little research has been done to hear the student perspective, what instructors can do to lower attrition rates. The student voice provides opportunities to look at issues from a different perspective. Encouraging students to

share offers an opportunity to learn what students believe contributes to their education and what struggles they encounter along the way.

Statement of the Problem

Students in developmental asynchronous online courses have many difficulties to overcome. One of these struggles is persisting in the online environment. Persisting is difficult when students struggle with other responsibilities, cultural hindrances, and academic difficulties.

With busy schedules, the often inability to attend classes on campus, and family responsibilities, students requiring developmental courses find it difficult to take college courses. But with the advent of the Internet, students can take courses online, working around their schedules, and never have to meet on a college campus. These asynchronous online courses seem the perfect solution. However these courses come with their own set of shortcomings. Oftentimes, environmental issues, such as the busyness of students, can be the reason so many students are not able to persist in the course. Likewise, many students struggle with internal factors such as lack of motivation to do course work, low confidence in the use of technology, and past struggles from previous courses, which can compound the problem of student retention. Finally, a third challenge has to do with course curriculum including not only the materials for the course, but the ongoing facilitating of the instructor (Croxton, 2014; Gaytan, 2015; Hart, 2012; Lee & Choi 2010; Park, 2007). If the instructor does not implement methods into the course to meet student needs, many will lose motivation and drop the course.

Therefore, this study seeks to address the high attrition rate among students in developmental asynchronous online courses offered at the University of Alaska.

Purpose of the Study

Keengwe and Kidd (2010) suggest the instructor's role in an online course revolves around pedagogy, creating a social environment to encourage learning, and being comfortable enough with technology to transfer that comfort to learners. These practices can help make participating in an online class a positive experience, but not necessarily affect the attrition rate. Although many believe that faculty-student interaction is important, it has yet to be discovered what this interaction looks like in the developmental asynchronous online course environment and if this interaction influences student attrition.

This study seeks to examine the relationships built between the instructor and the students, the self-determination of students, and the attrition rates among students enrolled in developmental asynchronous online courses at the University of Alaska.

Research Question

What implemented teacher care strategies, defined by students, might improve student self-determination and minimize attrition in developmental asynchronous online courses at University of Alaska campuses?

Rationale and Significance of the Study

Integrating the Internet into education has become a permanent fixture within the educational system (Allen & Seaman, 2017; Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2013; Jones, 2010). Although the popularity of online courses continues to grow, so do the challenges for students, instructors, and universities. One challenge is to help students succeed by keeping them enrolled in online courses. The attrition rate at both colleges and universities, defined as leaving without a grade for the class in which the student is registered (Hart, 2012), has been a continuing concern for educators. Allen and Seaman (2014) as well as others note that the attrition rate in

online courses is much higher than the rate in face-to-face courses and is a major barrier to online education growth (Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Brown, 2012; Clay, Rowland, & Packard, 2009; Willging & Johnson, 2009).

With the high attrition rates in online courses, it is necessary to find solutions to the problem for both students and institutions in order for students to be successful in online higher education (Gering, 2017). The reasons for solving the attrition rate problems are varied, including the negative impact on universities financially, as well as suggesting courses offered online are of low quality (Angelino et al., 2007; Liu, Gomez, & Yen, 2009; Willging & Johnson, 2009). Although these reasons for solving the attrition problem are important, it is more important to discover solutions, so students will complete online courses to further their education and complete their university training. Especially vulnerable to dropping out of courses are those enrolled in developmental online courses.

Jaggars and Bailey (2010) discovered the developmental online course student dropout rate was sharply higher than the same developmental course taken in the face-to-face format, often twice as high. Discovering not only why students drop these developmental online courses, but also how to keep students enrolled, is very important to student success. The importance lies in the fact that students who drop developmental courses have no other recourse but to retake the course or drop out of higher education completely since progress cannot be made without the completion of these courses.

Much research has been done seeking solutions to the high attrition rates of developmental online courses over the years, but little has been discovered that focuses on the asynchronous online format. This specific type of online course has no face-to-face meetings and allows student access to materials at any time (Rodriguez, 2015). It is also the most difficult

online format option for many students since there is no designated meeting time with the instructor or classroom peers causing many to feel isolated, have no accountability, and left with unanswered questions about the curriculum and the course from the instructor. Students enrolled in developmental asynchronous courses not only struggle more academically, but also deal with the additional strain of the asynchronous online format (Xu & Jaggars, 2014).

The few studies that have addressed attrition in the asynchronous online format suggest instructors receive pedagogy-based training for the online arena as well as learn advanced technical skills and experimentation with technology to better implement online teaching and communication tools producing a group of teachers who can relieve the struggle students often have with online curriculums (Castillo, 2013; Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012; Diaz, 2002; Gaytan, 2015). Although each of these suggestions may help improve the quality of an online course, there has been little research to determine if their implementation lowers attrition rates in the asynchronous online environment. In fact, Rodriguez (2015) states, "there is currently a call to further research social presence in fully online asynchronous courses in higher education...and to investigate a design for better online interaction and student participation" (p. 64).

Gifted instructors are challenged to look for opportunities to create a caring, social environment for students to build a sense of belonging in the online classroom (Plantes & Asselin, 2014). Studies on social presence, the feeling of social connection a learner experiences in an online environment (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2014) point to the importance of adding personal touches to the course by the instructor as well as encouraging communication between the instructor and students (Mayne & Wu, 2011). This allows students to feel a part of a community and may encourage greater success in the online format.

As one focuses on communication in the online format, relationships may develop. The relationship that is most vital appears to be between the student and instructor. At present, current research suggests one of the factors that determine whether a student continues or drops out of a class is dependent on the relationship between the student and the instructor and the student's satisfaction with this communication (Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012). Carr (2000) also regards frequent contact with students as critical to relationship building, yet the literature offers little direction as to the path instructors must take to build relationships with students enrolled in asynchronous online courses (Armellini & De Stefani, 2016).

As students continue to be frustrated with their struggles in online courses, they have little opportunity to share these frustrations with those who can empathize and offer solutions. Some feel isolated from other students and the instructor and often feel no one will help them in their effort to persist in their course. Research studies investigating reasons for attrition from a student perspective is essential to discover possible solutions to the high attrition in developmental asynchronous online courses. Although necessary to discover these reasons for attrition, it is also important to explore ways to solve the high attrition rate by discussing ideas with students that might encourage persistence.

With universities seeking to attract non-traditional students, there will continue to be a need for online courses (Van Doorn & Van Doorn, 2014). Of the online courses available, the asynchronous format will likely remain popular for students with demanding schedules. While there is interest in asynchronous online courses, the attrition rate for such courses remains high. In fact, it appears that the attrition rates are consistent with the 21% drop out rate at California community colleges (Hart, Friedmann, & Hill, 2016). This puts universities in a difficult position. University administrations must determine if the high attrition rates in these courses

offsets the cost savings associated with online courses (Hart, Friedmann, & Hill, 2016). If an answer could be found to lower these attrition rates, students would be more likely to complete their education and university enrollments would increase. Although there is literature focusing on the attrition rates of online courses, the additional research of student-teacher relationships in developmental asynchronous courses and its possible link to attrition would fill a gap that has remained unexplored.

Nature of the Study

To learn how the lived experiences of students enrolled in developmental asynchronous online courses within the University of Alaska system affects attrition rates, the phenomenological approach to research was implemented as it incorporates the lived experience of students to determine why they do what they do (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; O'Leary, 2014; Schwandt, 2015; Sokolowski, 2000). It is a qualitative methodology that emphasizes research findings by interviewing individual students to learn participant's stories as well as going deep into trying to discover the experience lived by the interviewee (van Manen, 1990).

Theoretical Framework

The theory of self-determination was the theoretical framework supporting this study. The theory, developed by Deci and Ryan (2002) concerns itself with the relationships between personality, behavior, social environment, and the many kinds of motivations human beings experience (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Raeburn, Schmied, Hungerford, & Cleary, 2015; Tran, 2014). Self-determination theory (SDT) is based on the pursuit to satisfy three psychological needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Deci et al., 1991). Satisfying the need for competence means that humans control the world around them and thus the outcome. People want to know what will happen if they perform a certain action. Relatedness refers to the

need to interact and connect with other people. It is the need for relationships. Autonomy concerns itself with having control over one's life. It is having free will to act out values and interests. It is the need to control one's life course based on beliefs and opinions.

Because many cultures are represented within the student body at the University of Alaska, the self-determination theory is important as a theoretical framework in this study because it crosses cultural lines; each of the three basic needs described above are universal necessities for all humans in both collectivist and individualist cultures (Church et al., 2013; Deci & Ryan, 2014; King & McInerney, 2014). Although each of these needs, autonomy, relatedness, and competence, have been shown to be universal, their meaning and the motivational influences to meet these needs varies between cultures (Jiang & Gore, 2016).

Motivation

Self-determination involves experiencing a sense of choice in what one is doing (Deci, Ryan, & Williams, 1996). For our needs to be met, we are motivated to meet these needs (Kanat-Maymon, Benjamin, Stavsky, Shoshani, & Roth, 2015). Self-determination theory has identified different types of motivation that are used to meet needs. Deci and colleagues, (1991) suggest two different types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation refers to the motivation from within. It is motivation for its own sake. It is acting or behaving because one enjoys the activity. Extrinsic motivation on the other hand, is acting for the sake of the outcome or reward (Renaud-Dube, Guay, Talbot, Taylor, & Koestner, 2015). Although extrinsic motivation is the least rewarding, it is most often the reason people are motivated (Tran, 2014). Three types of external motivation are discussed by Ntoumanis (2004). They are: (a) external regulation referring to behaviors carried out to attain tangible rewards; (b) introjected motivation, which refers to minimally internal motivation performed out of guilt or shame; and (c) identified

regulation, which represents behavior with self-determined motivation in which individuals perform certain behaviors by choice, but these behaviors are not necessarily enjoyed. Of the external motivators, identified regulation is the most autonomous and is a good predictor of course persistence (Renaud-Dube et al., 2015). Therefore, by promoting self-determination in online courses, students can be motivated to persist through a course (Gaytan, 2015).

In the academic setting, motivation means students have the desire and perseverance for academic success by completing courses as well as the program in which they are enrolled (Rosen, Glennie, Dalton, Lennon, & Bozick, 2010). Motivation is apparent whenever one determines goals, and puts forth effort (Bandura, 1995). It is one of many ways academic achievement can be attained (Close & Solberg, 2008). If learners can be motivated to be focused and dedicated, they can be successful and persist to the end of the course.

Although motivation is the driving force to meet human needs, a student's source of academic motivation varies among cultures (Guay, 2016; King & McInerney, 2014). Students from an individualist culture base motivation on their own autonomy, or enacting out their own values and goals, whereas students from a collectivist culture are motivated by the interdependence of the group be it, family, community, or classmates, as they internalize and react according to values or expectations of the group (Jiang & Gore, 2016).

When students enroll in an asynchronous online course, they are motivated to take the first step to meet their needs through education (Martin, Galentino, & Townsend, 2014). When students are motivated intrinsically, they are motivated from within. They are taking a course for their own pleasure, for their own satisfaction. There is interest and enjoyment in the behavior. The behavior is an expression of themselves (Deci, Ryan, & Williams, 1996). Externally motivated students are seeking external rewards such as grades or newly acquired skills. Those

who begin college courses are usually motivated externally (Renaud-Dube, Guay, Talbot, Taylor, & Koestner, 2015) and have a desire to complete, or persist to the end of the course. But oftentimes students encounter barriers, which can make persisting to course completion difficult.

Because self-determination theory is based on a student's motivation to meet their own needs, the instructor becomes the outside force that encourages students in their motivation (Russell, 2013). This motivational force from the instructor is considered a social factor and can either promote or undermine self-determined forms of motivation (Ntoumanis, 2004).

The self-determination theory bases motivation on the fulfillment of human needs (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2015). This starting point gives a purpose for motivation: meeting these needs. If the needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy are truly human needs, motivation to meet these needs will not diminish. If these needs are met in the academic environment, a student will likely persist and be successful as a student.

One of the three needs, relatedness, discussed in self-determination theory is a key piece to the research being done in the arena of retention of students in developmental asynchronous online courses and is therefore, a possible motivator to retention. This being the case, the self-determination theory as a theoretical framework will help to better evaluate the relationship aspect between teacher and student.

Self-determination, because of its connection between motivation and the fulfillment of student needs through experiencing their world, provides a framework to examine processes enabling students to make choices (Raeburn et al., 2015). Because self-determination emphasizes motivation and circumstances experienced, it can be placed within the social constructionist paradigm (Gergen, 2011). Social constructionists believe that understanding and knowledge is constructed through one's interpretations based on interactions with the ever-

changing world (Creswell, 2014; O'Leary, 2014; Schwandt, 2015). It puts emphasis on the individual's ability to construct meaning through their perception and personal experience of the world (Mack, 2010; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). This means knowledge is gained through experience, as humans interpret, from their perspectives, reality as they interact and engage in everyday events (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006; O'Leary, 2014).

Definition of Terms

Asynchronous online courses. This type of online course is defined as a course with no face-to-face meetings where instructors provide student access to materials anytime (Rodriguez, 2015). Not only do these courses offer students the opportunity to take classes online rather than in a classroom on campus, but they allow students to access their class anytime, from anywhere since the class never meets in real-time (Northey et al., 2015).

Attrition rate. Attrition rate is defined as leaving without a grade for the class in which the student is registered (Hart, 2012),

Curriculum. Curriculum is defined as "a planned educational experience" (Kern et al., 1998, p. 1) and includes not only the textbook and other course materials for the class, but all that occurs in the online classroom experience (Lee & Choi, 2010).

Developmental courses. Developmental courses are defined as those courses, below the 100-level, students must take who lack the skills necessary to perform college level work (Chen & Simone, 2016; Hodara & Cox, 2016) prior to beginning college level courses.

Environmental or external factors. Defined as time constraints, family responsibilities, community obligations, life circumstances, and work commitments outside of the college environment (McMahon, 2013; Park, 2007).

Motivation. In the academic setting, motivation means that students have the desire and perseverance for academic success by completing courses as well as the program in which they are enrolled (Rosen et al., 2010). Motivation is apparent whenever one determines goals, and puts forth effort (Bandura, 1995).

Online courses. This type of course is a way to educate students with instruction and content delivered primarily over the Internet, often in real-time, but with little, if any, face-to-face meetings (Dalton, 2012; Staker & Horn, 2012; Watson et al., 2004).

Persistence. The trait that allows someone to continue doing something or trying to do something even though it is difficult or opposed by other people (Smith, 2015).

Student or internal factors. Defined as the background of the student in areas of past online course experience as well as educational background, locus of control, self-efficacy, motivation, and self-regulatory skills (Lee & Choi, 2010).

Teacher social presence. Teacher social presence, is the 'visibility' of the instructor in the online classroom as perceived by the student (Baker, 2010) as the teacher focuses on creating and maintaining a learning environment that encourages student participation and communication.

Assumptions and Limitations

Assumptions and limitations are elements of every study, making them a natural part of the research process. To bring them to the forefront in the researcher's reflection of the study is prudent and necessary. In this phenomenological study, it is assumed participants in the interview will be honest as they reveal their successes and challenges with instructors, course content, and curriculum design in past and current asynchronous online developmental courses. It is also assumed that students have an interest in the research and improvement of

asynchronous online courses and are not motivated by better grades in a course they are currently enrolled in, or any other rewards.

When defining the limitations of a research study, the focus is on areas the researcher has no control (Brutus, Aguinis, & Wassmer, 2013). These limitations are weaknesses and restrictions in a study that can affect both the design and results. In this phenomenological study, several limitations exist. Creswell (2013) suggests the use of criterion sampling in a phenomenological study as it includes students who have all experienced the same phenomenon. This forces the research to be specific to a situation with certain students at a particular institution, making generalizing difficult, therefore limiting the study. The findings of this study will be specifically applicable to the University of Alaska and the unique population of students who attend, rather than being generalized to other university populations without first making the judgment as to the relevance to their own settings or contexts (Englander, 2012). It is also important to note that most phenomenological studies cannot be replicated (Gast, 2014) because of the natural setting where the qualitative research takes place. Another limitation of this study is the quality and accuracy of responses from participants. Using interviews to collect data allows participants to share deep, meaningful experiences, but time constraints limit the amount of information collected.

Organization of the Remainder of the Study

As the study of attrition rates of students in developmental asynchronous online courses continued, Chapter 2 is a literature review and Chapter 3 is a description of the study's methodology. Chapter 4 describes the analysis of data. Finally, in Chapter 5, is a summary of the research as well as recommendations for future study.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction to the Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to provide background literature related to attrition rates of students attending universities. The literature was reviewed to further understand: (a) online courses and learners, (b) concepts of teacher social presence, (c) persistence based on the integration of self-determination through teacher social presence in the course design, (d) facilitation, and direct instruction of the course, and (e) the further need of teacher social presence amongst developmental asynchronous online students.

The chapter is organized into six sections, focusing on: (a) the theoretical framework of the study, (b) the definition of online courses, their use to educate students, and online student profile, (c) teacher social presence, (d) student persistence, (e) self-determination and its relationship to teacher social presence, and (f) developmental asynchronous online courses and students enrolled in these courses within the asynchronous online environment in the University of Alaska Statewide System.

Theoretical Framework

The self-determination theory was used as the theoretical framework for this research study. Self-determination theory (SDT) has as its presupposition every humans' propensity to develop a rich and interconnected sense of self by bringing together both the integrating of oneself with others and one's independent thoughts or actions (Ryan & Deci, 2002).

Human needs, according to the SDT theory are *"innate psychological nutriments that are essential for ongoing psychological growth, integrity, and well-being"* (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 229, italics in original source). As children grow, they integrate external values and behaviors,

internalizing them and making them their own. The ideal conditions that create an internalization of these behaviors are those that encourage autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci, 1995). This motivation toward meeting one's psychological needs varies on a continuum from extrinsic motivation to internal motivation and is organized around these psychological needs (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2002). These needs, and the degree to which they are met, are universal necessities and essential for human development. They are the basis for determining how optimal a person's personality development and quality of life within a specific situation may be (Gagne & Deci, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2002).

Each person strives to meet their need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness in different ways. Each person will be at various levels of actualization, with fluctuations throughout each day as they try to satisfy needs within their social environment (Gagne & Deci, 2005). SDT also recognizes that this growth toward self-actualization can be impeded or discouraged by various external interactions. Even though individuals have an innate desire to grow and mature, social environment experiences can stifle the drive to develop a "unified sense of self" (Ryan & Deci, 2002, p. 5).

Within the realm of education, the self-determination theory states that when the classroom environment, through the curriculum, structure and instructional strategies of the class, as well as the relationship between the teacher and the student, strive to meet the basic needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness within the student, students will better engage in the learning process within the online learning environment (Hartnett, 2015; Skinner, Marchand, Furer, & Kindermann, 2008). It will also encourage students to value their learning and to be confident in the abilities and qualities they possess.

On the other hand, the lack of encouraging autonomy, competency, and relatedness in the classroom will undermine a student's engagement in their academic work (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Hartnett (2015) found this to be true in her research study of online pre-service teachers in New Zealand. She used a case study methodology in which motivation of pre-service teachers was explored to determine which influences undermined student motivation. Using purposive sampling, 12 students located throughout New Zealand were selected. These students were in their third or fourth year of elementary education teacher training and had significant experience with online education and matched the general demographics of the course. Data collected was gained from online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, as well as from online discussion transcripts generated during the course. The results showed that no one factor undermined student autonomy, competency, or relatedness, but a range of social and related influences did. It was discovered that when students experienced time pressures, teacher control with no opportunity of student choice, firm deadlines, limited input by the instructor, and complications with technology, there was a detrimental effect on autonomy. Students also displayed frustration from the lack of instructor input, infrequent performance feedback, and unclear expectations, resulting in feelings of anxiety and helplessness, leading to lower competency levels. Finally, when students were placed in small groups to produce projects, some students felt disconnected and undermined by collaborative partners who were difficult to work with. This collaboration with group members was the only opportunity for students to build a sense of relatedness leaving some students hurt and frustrated with classmates, which undermined connectedness between some students. It should be noted that both autonomy and competency was undermined when there was limited teacher input in the course.

Autonomy

Autonomy refers to being self-initiating and able to regulate one's own actions rather than feeling controlled or pressured by outside forces (Deci et al., 1991; Kanat-Maymon, et al., 2015). Autonomy is seeing actions as being the expression of the true self when one's behavior originates from within (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This need includes an individual's sense of choice and freedom to initiate and regulate personal behavior (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Powelson, 1991). An individual is more autonomous as the perception of being the source and initiator of behavior increases (Ryan & Deci, 2002).

In the classroom, whether face-to-face or online, autonomy is the opportunity students are given to make choices within the social and learning environment (Riley, 2015; Ryan & Powelson, 1991). It is important to note however, it is not the actual choices that build autonomy, but the perception of choice, or lack of it that determines a student's sense of autonomy (Hartnett, 2015). This approach is contrasted by coercive demanding strategies motivating students by real or conceived control, and pressures from society or within (Brown & Ryan, 2015; Raeburn et al., 2015). Under these conditions, students can lose their enthusiasm and interest in learning and become anxious and bored (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). The encouragement of autonomy happens when a teacher promotes teaching practices such as providing multiple topic options for assignments, encouraging discussion, eliciting students' opinions, and using multiple teaching techniques to meet various student learning styles (Goldman & Brann, 2016).

Competency

Competence has been defined as "feeling effective in one's ongoing interactions with the social environment and experiencing opportunities to exercise and express one's capacities"

(Ryan & Deci, 2002, p. 7). Put another way, it is a feeling of being involved and a belief that one can influence outcomes that happen in life in the context of community (Bandura, 1995; Deci et al., 1991; Marshik, Ashton, & Algina, 2017; Raeburn et al., 2015). This need for competence is derived from the exercise of one's abilities as they seek to be challenged (Ryan & Deci, 2002; Ryan & Powelson, 1991).

Within the learning environment, competency, which shares similarities with self-efficacy, is manifested when a student believes and has confidence they can control and carry out desired behaviors successfully (Bandura, 1995; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Ruzek and colleagues (2016) believe that student competency building may be related to a teacher's instructional interactions when addressing students. Therefore, competency can be fostered when a teacher provides feedback on performance, challenges students in assignments, provides public praise, and offers opportunities for students to publicly demonstrate their skills (Goldman & Brann, 2016; Meyer, 2014).

Relatedness

Students work harder, are more connected with what is happening in the classroom, achieve more academically, and are motivated to succeed when they believe their teachers understand and care about them (Deci et al., 1991; Marshik et al., 2017). This social context, called "relatedness", and defined as the need for fulfilling, securing, and supporting relationships (Deci et al., 1991), influences how competency and autonomy are perceived (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Raeburn et al., 2015; Ryan & Powelson, 1991). Ryan and Powelson (1991) explain relatedness as an emotionally connective bond formed as one strives for support and community with others. Ryan and Deci (2000) further describe relatedness as "a desire to feel connected to others-to love and care, and to be loved and cared for" (p. 231). In the classroom environment,

students can feel this connective bond with teachers as teachers make a conscientious effort to demonstrate care for their students, communicate with students outside the classroom, introduce and allow humor in the classroom, and be willing to self-disclose to students by sharing past successes and failures (Goldman & Brann, 2016; Ruzek et al., 2016).

When the meeting of needs is encouraged within an educational social context, student performance and development are increased (Deci et al., 1991). Together, these three needs; autonomy, competency, and relatedness are intertwined and work together to assist with, or undermine the motivation of students (Hartnett, 2015).

Motivation

According to the self-determination theory, motivation is the result of having the needs of autonomy, competency, and relatedness met (Reeve, 2002). It is the force that moves students to face their challenges in education and real life (Cook & Artino, 2016; Gopalan, Zulkifli, Alwi, & Mat, 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In a study by Hartnett, St. George, and Dron (2014), the authors describe how the psychological needs of autonomy, competency, and relatedness might be connected to motivation in the online classroom. Their study was exploratory and sought to better understand student experiences and motivation in an online course. The methodology used was a case study and included a purposive sample of nine pre-service elementary education students spread throughout New Zealand in their second year of education. Data was collected from online questionnaires and face-to-face, semi-structured interviews followed by collecting asynchronous online discussion transcripts. The questionnaire collected demographic data and self-report measures of motivation using the situational motivational scale developed by Guay, Vallerand, and Blanchard (2000). The open-ended questions were used to find possible links between

social and circumstantial influences and motivation. The interviews were used to better understand students' experiences and how these experiences influenced their motivation in the online course. It was found that the themes supporting autonomy the most were course relevance, interest in the subject being taught, flexibility, and opportunity to choose. Students reported a sense of competence mainly through clear guidelines and timeliness, as well as supportive feedback. Students also were able to build knowledge on prior experience through activities that were challenging. Finally, it was found that the relationship between the instructor and students was more significant than between students. The study confirmed previous research that autonomy, competency, and relatedness are influenced by course instructors, curriculum design, and learning activities. Beyond this, the study also demonstrated that when student differences are considered and accommodated, their psychological needs will be met, creating high quality motivation for students to succeed.

Fostering motivation among students is a key to student learning and is a significant predictor of college student success (Goldman & Brann, 2016). Highly motivated students are interested, enthusiastic, and more willing to face challenges in the classroom, have higher school retention rates, and have higher achievement rates (Marshik et al., 2017).

Seminal writers of self-determination theory suggest there is both a level, or an amount of motivation a person has, and an orientation, or underlying reason for motivation. This orientation distinguishes between three different types of motivation based on goals that give rise to action; intrinsic, amotivation, and extrinsic (Deci et al., 1991; Reeve, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Powelson, 1991).

Intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is "doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 55). It is a fully volitional act with no external

rewards, done for the simple pleasure and satisfaction derived (Deci et al., 1991). When motivated intrinsically students partake in the learning process because they enjoy and derive satisfaction from the activity (Reeve, 2002). Intrinsically motivated students perceive the locus of control to be from within and engage freely because of interest and enjoyment (Ryan & Deci, 2002).

The self-determination theory posits that when the needs of autonomy, competency, and relatedness are fulfilled in the classroom, students will experience intrinsic motivation (Goldman & Brann, 2016; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Riley, 2015). Ideal student learning and behavior in the classroom takes place when students are motivated intrinsically (Hartnett, 2015; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Raeburn et al., 2015). Although intrinsically motivating students is ideal, unfortunately most classroom activities do not generate intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Amotivation. Amotivation occurs when there is no motivation. Amotivation occurs when a student believes there is no value or purpose to the behavior, feels incompetent, or does not expect any desired outcome (Brown & Ryan, 2015; Pelletier, Tuson, & Haddad, 1997; Raeburn et al., 2015).

Extrinsic motivation. A third form of motivation, extrinsic motivation, refers to being motivated through an external locus of control, real or perceived, either through social contexts or internal influences leading to an external outcome (Brown & Ryan, 2015; Deci et al., 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This type of motivation is based on rewards, punishment, or guilt to control desired behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2002; Sweet, Fortier, Strachan, & Blanchard, 2012). Extrinsic motivation is often used in education in the form of incentives such as grades and tokens since many aspects of education are not inherently enjoyable to students and they need

other reasons to learn since they are not intrinsically motivated (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Riley, 2015).

The self-determination theory postulates four types of extrinsic motivation on a continuum according to the extent to which behavior is externally or internally structured. These four stages, falling between amotivation and intrinsic motivation, are labeled: external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, and integrated regulation (Deci et al., 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2002).

External regulation. This type of extrinsic motivation is closest to amotivation along the continuum (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2015) and is the classic case in which people are motivated by rewards or to avoid punishment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It involves the feeling of being controlled outside of self (Brown & Ryan, 2015).

Introjected regulation. One step closer to intrinsic motivation is introjected motivation. Where external regulation motivation is contingent on external consequences, introjected regulation is contingent on internal consequences such as guilt or shame, or even to maintain a sense of self-worth (Brown & Ryan, 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Identified regulation. This type of regulation, albeit more intrinsic, is still extrinsic since one is motivated by the self. It is motivation based on doing something because one believes it is important or valuable rather than gaining any derived satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

Integrated regulation. This type of extrinsic motivation is closest to intrinsic motivation because it goes beyond motivation based on the importance of behavior but integrates them into the self and fully accepts them as part of their values and identity (Pelletier et al., 1997). It is motivated behavior consistent with one's values and interests (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

Integrated motivation has an internal locus of control, but because the motivated behavior seeks a separable outcome rather than for simple interest or pleasure, it is considered extrinsic (Brown & Ryan, 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2002; Sweet et al., 2012).

Students have a need for control and a need for freedom to make decisions, to believe they can succeed in the challenges school offers, and to be able to connect emotionally with others. As teachers help build autonomy, competence, and relatedness among students, it is likely that students will progress along the extrinsically motivated continuum, closer and closer to being intrinsically motivated.

The SDT theory proposes that the internalization of extrinsic motivation, or progression toward intrinsically motivated behavior, will likely happen when engaging students, as students are then more likely to believe they have a sense of control, believe they can be successful, and believe a relationship exists in the classroom, even if they do not have any interest, intrinsically, in the subject being taught (Deci et al., 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Marshik et al., 2017; Ryan, Deci, & Grolnick, 1995). More specifically, if an instructor facilitates a sense of belonging and connectedness to students, this becomes the impetus behind a student internalizing otherwise extrinsic motivated behavior. This happens primarily because external prompting can be internalized within students when they feel connected through the care and respect from teachers whom they value and consider significant in their lives (Ruzek et al., 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Encouraging student motivation is a key component to student success. Those who are unmotivated exert little effort, lack interest, are apathetic, and feel incompetent (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Those who are motivated, especially those who are moving along the continuum toward being intrinsically motivated, are more persistent when tasks are difficult, can cope with

challenges, and are more interested in learning activities (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Marshik et al., 2017).

Online Courses

Technology, including the Internet, has been a vital piece of the educational puzzle for many years. It has been used to supplement college coursework and serve as the primary medium in which coursework is completed. In recent years, college level courses have been made available using this technology. These online courses, defined as college courses with content delivered primarily over the Internet, requiring communication through technology, with little, if any face-to-face contact (Allen & Seaman, 2017; Dalton, 2012; Moore & Kearsley, 2011; Staker & Horn, 2012), have exploded in popularity. This popularity can be partially attributed to shrinking budgets and dwindling student enrollments by allowing universities to offer low-cost, flexible courses to students around the world (Casey, 2008). This online system of course delivery has transformed the college environment and has allowed access and flexibility to students, including those who in the past were unable to attend college (Bawa, 2016). Both traditional and non-traditional college students who struggle with scheduling on-campus courses around family time, jobs, and other community commitments are especially attracted to these courses (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2013).

The number of students enrolled in online courses continues to grow at an annual rate of over 6% with over 29.7% of college students taking at least one online course in 2012 (Allen & Seaman, 2017). Specifically, within the University of Alaska System in 2013, 38 percent of the student body was enrolled in online courses. Between 2002 and 2012, the online growth rate of college students enrolled in online courses was 16.1 percent, whereas the annual overall college

enrollment growth rate during this same period was 2.5 percent (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2013; Atchley, Wingenbach, & Akers, 2013).

Online Student Profile

Watching the continued growth in online courses, the question arises as to why so many students are choosing the online format over the conventional face-to-face classroom setting. The answer centers around convenience, flexibility, and increased access to online courses offered. Up to 90 percent of students attracted to the online format are from a more mature student demographic, 25 years old and older; who have a social life outside the university environment (Jaggars, 2013; Kizilcec, 2015; Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2016; Preisman, 2014; Renes & Strange, 2011; Yukselturk & Top, 2013), or who may find it difficult, if not impossible, to attend a university campus (Mayne & Wu, 2011; Plantes & Asselin, 2014).

Adult learners. The adult college population; students who are older than the traditional college student (18-21), has increased as large numbers of adults seek additional education to advance within their current line of work, or seek a better financial base for their families (Castillo, 2013). Within the University of Alaska System, these adult learners make up more than 61 percent of the online student population (Report on University of Alaska e-Learning, 2013). These students typically face different types of life commitments than younger students and find online courses attractive since the online environment allows planning coursework around childcare, work schedules, and other non-negotiable commitments vying for their time (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2013; Castillo, 2013; Kasworm, 2010; Mupinga, Nora, & Yaw, 2006).

Many older adults find that online courses are not only appealing but are necessary as the courses might be their only hope for education beyond high school (Xu & Jaggars, 2014). Oftentimes, these students need to eliminate commute costs by both time-shifting and space-

shifting to allow study schedules that are optimal for them (Jaggars, 2011). Many adult students have family responsibilities that conflict with face-to-face course schedules and appreciate the opportunity to integrate their online courses with time spent with family (Renes, 2015; Van Doorn & Van Doorn, 2014).

Adult learners are also made up of students who have been out of the formal classroom for several years and are no longer accustomed to the classroom environment and feel unprepared, uncomfortable and out of place in a classroom of younger students (Kasworm, 2010; Travers, 2016).

Rural students. Online courses are also attractive to learners who are dispersed throughout the rural setting with great distances between their homes and a college campus, or no road system connecting their communities with the larger college community. This is often the situation for many students living in Alaska's remote communities seeking to attend a university (Reyes & Bradley, 2000).

Many times, students from remote areas have responsibilities that would cause hardships for others if they left the community for school. At the heart of Indigenous knowledge systems, as those found throughout the State of Alaska, is the idea that community survival is based on the selflessness and commitment of each member (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; McKinley, Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, & Solyom, 2012). These remote learners often see no other option for university courses than the online environment (Travers, 2016) since by remaining at home, students can devote time to work, family, and their communities, while doing coursework at a time convenient to them.

Military. Members of the United States Armed Forces are often found in a unique situation when trying to attend college. They often move from location to location, are

sometimes deployed for a short time with little notice or are stationed for several years in a foreign country and not able to leave their base. Yet, these young men and women hope to take college classes amidst the constant changes (Starr-Glass, 2013; Wilson & Smith, 2012).

With technological advances and financial help available for them, it is now possible for members of the military to enroll in college classes using the online format (Radford, Bentz, Dekker, & Paslov, 2016). Because online courses make a soldier's physical location irrelevant, it seems an ideal option for them to continue working their jobs while taking college courses (Renes, 2015).

Finally, U.S. military members profit from communication with others, even through the online environment. Often, military members who are in an isolated environment located abroad, seek out online courses for the opportunity to be in class with civilian students from the United States to build relationships with others back home (Bricker, 2012).

Disabled. Another group of students who may benefit from the online environment are those who have a mental or physical disability. By being able to take courses online, these students can pursue their education in an environment better suited for them than a college campus (Renes, 2015; Williams, 2017).

Online courses can be a solution for students whose learning needs are not able to be met in the classroom. Since the online environment offers students control over time, place, and pace, this can be an answer for many students with a mental disability (Serianni & Coy, 2014). In addition to having more flexibility over scheduling work for a class, these online students are also able to receive more individualized attention without drawing attention to themselves. This gives the instructor the opportunity to make any necessary changes to the curriculum to better help these students (Williams, 2017). Also, using the Internet as the medium for teaching,

allows instructors to design classes around various learning styles and struggles students may have (Serianni & Coy, 2014).

Included with the population of students with disabilities who find online courses attractive, are those who have a physical disability. These students have discovered that Internet courses can play a key role in improving their opportunities for a college education without the need to access the traditional classroom (Renes, 2015; Williams, 2017). Some students also claim that attending courses online "equalizes" them with their cohorts rather than being noticed as being different (Betts, Cohen, Veit, Alphin, & Broadus, 2013; Xu & Jaggars, 2014).

As technology continues to advance, online classes become a more positive, viable option rather than a decision that students "settle for" because they have no other choice (Watts, 2016). Online courses are an alternative option to the face-to-face classroom environment, especially attractive to adult students, those who live in rural communities with no college campus nearby, men and women who often change their geographic locations while being enlisted in the military, and those who have either a mental or physical disability. This online environment offers students courses in two different formats of instruction: synchronous and asynchronous.

Synchronous Courses

Synchronous online courses are defined as those which have a percentage of their communication using "rich-media synchronous technologies such as video conferencing, web conferencing, or virtual worlds" (Bower, Dalgarno, Kennedy, Lee, & Kenney, 2015, p. 1) to meet in real-time. Much of the work is completed by the student independently, but discussions, question answering, and projects may be done during a scheduled meeting time with students and instructor. With evolving technology, synchronous media opportunities have become an option for more teacher/student engagement (Watts, 2016).

Synchronous online courses allow students to discuss and collaborate with others in real-time helping students remain focused and feel a strong sense of contribution (Falloon, 2011; Hrastinski, 2010). Because they meet in real-time, students naturally have a sense of social presence, or personal connectedness, with the instructor as well as other students and appreciate the immediate feedback synchronous courses offer (Buxton, 2014; Falloon, 2011; Watts, 2016). This social presence has been shown to have a positive impact on student satisfaction in the online environment, encouraging students to persist through the course (Bolinger & Inan, 2012; Hart, 2012).

On the negative side of synchronous online courses; students often feel there is a potential for conflict in student scheduling because of the required meeting in real-time and the frustration this causes when other responsibilities come up beyond their control (Watts, 2016). Therefore, many adult learners prefer the flexibility and convenience of the asynchronous format over the social presence more easily obtained in the synchronous environment (Soper & Ukot, 2016).

Asynchronous Courses

Asynchronous online courses on the other hand, offer students an online environment by allowing access to their classes anytime from anywhere since the courses rarely, if ever, meet in real time (Northey et al., 2015). This type of learning format changes the role of the instructor to more of a facilitator helping to construct knowledge, acquire skills, and transmit information to students. The role of the student also changes to that of an active learner who engages with the course materials and instructor (Majeski, Stover, & Ronch, 2016).

When comparing course satisfaction, Eric Buxton (2014) evaluated both asynchronous and synchronous courses. An 8-lecture class was offered to 41 students, followed by a 50-

question online survey to evaluate student perceptions of the experience. He found that students rated the asynchronous courses higher than synchronous courses, not because of the quality of the course, but primarily because of the ability to control the timing of course availability, thus providing more satisfaction with the asynchronous environment.

This "on-demand" format of education gives students independence by allowing them to control the timing of its access. In Chen and deNoyelles' (2013) research, they collected a survey questionnaire from 1,082 students which revealed that over 58% of mobile device owners and over 82% of tablet owners used them for educational purposes. The ability to use mobile devices and tablets give students more access to courses. This time-shifting is especially helpful for adult students who need to arrange study schedules around fixed time commitments or live in different time zones, as well as provide higher student satisfaction with the course (Buxton, 2014). However, flexibility and convenience are not the only attraction to asynchronous online courses.

Within the structure of the asynchronous environment, it has been shown that students are able to engage with course content more deeply based on the pedagogical construct of the courses including video and student discussion opportunities (Griffiths & Graham, 2010; Gomez-Rey, Barbera, & Gernandez-Navarro, 2017; Watts, 2016). Buxton (2014) reported that students believed there was a reduction in transactional distance, the psychological and communication gap students often experience in the online environment (Watts, 2016), when courses were designed with a component encouraging online discussion. Watts (2016) found students were more satisfied with asynchronous courses because there was the opportunity to reflect and take time to consider their thoughts when responding to discussion topics. These results were consistent with Falloon's (2011) research. Falloon explored the use of the Adobe

Connect virtual classroom in a synchronous web-based environment in a qualitative study including 30 postgraduate students attending the University of Waikato. He discovered that students struggled with the synchronous environment with respect to the immediacy to generate comments and "looking silly" in front of other students.

The goals of either format, synchronous and asynchronous, are to ensure that students are engaged in the course, acknowledge they are part of the learning process, and as a result, retain the information learned in the class (Watts, 2016). These goals are best met when students feel a "presence" or connectedness with the instructor. This connectedness, called teacher social presence, occurs naturally in most synchronous environments because much of the discussion and instruction happen in real-time, but can occur in the asynchronous environment when the instructor takes additional steps to ensure that it happens.

Teacher Social Presence

Because of improvements in technology, participants in asynchronous online courses can feel more connected than ever before. This connection between the instructor and the student, called teacher social presence, is at the heart of the most effective online learning environments (Baker, 2010; Tichavsky, Hunt, Driscoll, & Jicha, 2015) and enables learners to see their instructors as caring and helpful even in the asynchronous online environment (Wise, Chang, Duffy, & Del Valle, 2004). Costley and Lange (2016) define this connectedness between instructor and student as "instructor behaviors that help facilitate and direct learning within the context of an online learning environment" (p. 90). Richardson and colleagues further this definition with, "the specific actions and behaviors taken by the instructor that project him/herself as a real person. It is how an instructor positions him/herself socially and pedagogically in an online community" (Richardson et al., 2015, p. 259).

In a qualitative research case study by Boling and colleagues (2012), ten students and six instructors were selected to participate in finding intricate details about their experiences in the online classroom. Using a purposive sample, participants were selected from a variety of online programs, who had prior experience in the online environment and who represented different programs, levels of education, and viewpoints. To ensure a richer understanding of what encourages or hinders student success, a variety of disciplines were represented by both instructors and students. Each participant agreed to a 60-minute interview and shared relevant course materials to learn more about content and instructor approach to the course. During the interviews, students and instructors shared their online experiences and pedagogical tools and curriculum that were more educational and productive for their learning. Two significant themes surfaced from the data. First was the disconnect students felt when instructors did not make it a point to connect or interact with students. Students better enjoyed the course and believed the instructor was "good" when the instructor was easily accessible and was flexible when schedule struggles occurred. A second theme was based on feedback by the instructor. Students felt more connected to the class and the instructor when the instructor took the time to comment and provide rich feedback to the student.

Although teacher social presence is an integral part of online student success, it is not always included in the pedagogical constructs in asynchronous online courses (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012). Without a teacher's social presence integrated within asynchronous online courses, students can feel isolated, might believe they are expected to learn all the material on their own, and have no connection with the instructor to get questions answered. Tichavsky and colleagues (2015) found this "disconnect" during their research to determine why students preferred face-to-face courses over online courses. Survey data was

collected from 18 introductory-level sociology courses half of which were online courses and half face-to-face courses at a Southeastern university in the United States. Undergraduate student participants represented a variety of majors and grade levels. Near the end of the semester, students were given the opportunity to fill out an online survey with both closed and open-ended questions. The most dominant theme in student explanations for preferring face-to-face classes (50%) was related to instructor interaction. Moreover, the lack of teacher social presence requires students to be strong in the areas of self-motivation and self-regulation, often adding to the struggle of an already challenging course (Tichavsky et al., 2015).

In a mixed-methods design by Hodges and Forest-Cowan (2012), 52 undergraduate preservice teacher candidates taking 100% of their courses online at a university in the Southeastern United States were investigated to determine instructor presence in the online environment. Students in the study consisted of 44 female students and eight males with an average age of 21.90 years, all majoring in education. The courses used in this study were usually the first experience a student had within the online environment. Student participants completed a 22-question online survey with both multiple-choice and open-ended questions to gain a list of typical actions an instructor takes to set up, deliver, and monitor a course. In a mixed method design, both the quantitative and qualitative analyses confirmed each other showing that students' primary concerns in the online environment include instructor's timely responses, availability, clear instructions, and quality course design. Each of these instructor actions were found to strengthen the teacher social presence within the online setting and have a profoundly strong influence on student success (Hodges & Forest-Cowan, 2012; Hostetter & Busch, 2013). This presence and interaction between the instructor and the student is associated with higher learning experiences and is a key predictor of student satisfaction and fulfillment in

an online learning program (Arbaugh & Benbunan-Fich, 2007; Eom & Ashill, 2016; Horzum, 2015; Ladyshewsky, 2013; Nandi, Hamilton, & Harland, 2012).

Through these studies, it was found that teacher presence can be a deliberate strategy instructors can use to establish connectedness with their students in the asynchronous online environment (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2014; Richardson et al., 2015) and may play a significant role in the persistence of student enrollment in these courses. To create this presence, instructors must develop patterns of interaction, methods to communicate with students, provide quality feedback, and offer content expertise (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2008). This is established through the design and organization of the course as well as through facilitation and direct instruction (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Crawford & Persaud, 2013).

Instructional Design

Students need a clear idea of the course design to feel organized and have a sense of direction (Costley, 2016). Eom and Ashill (2016) believe a course design "is concerned with the planning and design of the course structure and with the process, engagement, interaction, and evaluation aspects of the course" (p. 196).

Eom and Ashill (2016) further found that a well-designed online course has a strong and positive relationship to student satisfaction as well as learner outcomes. Through a survey questionnaire collected from 372 students from a university in the Midwestern United States, Eom and Ashill measured motivation, self-regulation, roles of instructor, and course design. In summary, the findings of the research indicated that course design was a strong predictor of student satisfaction and learning outcomes. For a course to be successful, instructors must spend time prior to the start of class to evaluate, structure, and design the format specifically for the online environment rather than create a course similar to a face-to-face course (Tobin, 2014).

There should be a focus on new pedagogy by reorganizing curriculum to be easily accessible to online students. This is done by modifying assessments, providing a clear and organized syllabus available to students prior to the start of the course to give students clear direction, and making appropriate use of online tools to further encourage student learning (Anderson et al., 2001; Hixon, Buckenmeyer, & Barczyk, 2015; Samuel, 2015).

Facilitating Discourse

When facilitating within the asynchronous online environment, instructors can encourage students to maintain interest and stay motivated through the creation of teacher social presence (Anderson et al., 2001). Using case study methodology, Richardson and colleagues (2015) investigated 12 online instructors teaching Master's level courses from a large Midwestern public university and their use of teacher social presence within the facilitation of courses. The results from the study not only provided rich description of teacher presence but provided strategies for online instructors as they look for ways to incorporate instructional presence opportunities. The instructors in this study also demonstrated the low effort it takes to establish social presence within course facilitation when the instructor is familiar with what teacher presence looks like.

Teacher social presence during course facilitation researched by Richardson and colleagues (2015), found successful teacher presence strategies through the implementation of communication immediacy, explained as behaviors that reduce the psychological distance between online participants (Baker, 2010), enhancing closeness and interaction (Smith & Maiden, 2015). Immediacy can be displayed in a variety of ways as teachers regularly read and comment on student discussion posts, texts, or emails and remain an active member of the online community of students (Anderson et al., 2001). A key to this immediacy in the online

environment involves attentiveness to students through frequent and rich communication (Baker, 2010; Eom & Ashill, 2016). Therefore, it is suggested that immediacy is a vital component to the success of creating a positive teacher social presence within the online community.

Direct Instruction

In the online environment, instructors frequently switch between course facilitator and instructor. In the direct instruction position, teachers direct the cognitive and social processes of students to make the course educationally valuable (Smith & Maiden, 2015) using both informal and formal roles. Arbaugh (2010) investigated the informal and formal roles of the instructor and found in 46 MBA courses examined, that each was a key predictor of student satisfaction and student perceived learning. The formal role of the instructor includes teaching presence, course design, and direct instruction, whereas the informal role provides immediacy behaviors to reduce the social and psychological distance between the instructor and student (Eom & Ashill, 2016). This means that each role, formal and informal, must be used together under the direction of the instructor to increase student success and satisfaction in the asynchronous online environment.

When an instructor is "present" in an asynchronous online course through technology-based interactions with students, both instructors and students finish the course with a sense of satisfaction. When students do not feel a connection to the instructor, they often experience isolation and confusion about course expectations and lack the relationship needed to feel a part of the course's environment. Therefore, a teacher's social presence has been shown to be a key to student success in the online setting ensuring that students are engaged, part of the learning process, and able to retain the information learned in class (Watts, 2016). Therefore, teacher

social presence can help to increase a student's persistence to remain enrolled in an online course (Croxton, 2014)

Student Persistence

When a student persists or completes an online course despite challenges and adverse circumstances (Hart, 2012), there is a sense of accomplishment as well as an improved chance the student will continue to persist in future online courses (Hachey, Conway, & Wladis, 2013). Persistence, or course retention, like course satisfaction, consistently has teacher social presence as its foundation.

The importance of teacher social presence to lower student attrition in online courses was reported in a study by Robb and Sutton (2014) using email communication as the source of teacher social presence. The focus of this study was to determine the effect motivational email messages might have on student motivation and persistence. In their research, students from 12 online courses in an online community college were randomly assigned to two groups, an experimental group and a control group. The experimental group received five motivational emails over the course of the semester and completed an open-ended, six question survey upon completion of the online class. The theoretical framework for this study followed the ARCS model regarding how attention, relevance, confidence, and satisfaction motivate students and used the Keller's Course Interest Survey to measure this motivation. It was determined that there was a significant association between a teacher showing presence through email messages and student motivation and completion rates. The results of this research give valuable insights as to how simple motivational emails, reflecting teacher social presence, can have a profound effect on student motivation and persistence in an online course (Robb & Sutton, 2014).

Building teacher social presence in the asynchronous online environment is not limited to text-based communication. Hegeman (2015) found that using instructor-generated video lectures in a course also caused attrition to drop.

Hegeman's research focused on three research questions: Can student performance in an online college algebra test be improved by using instructor-generated video lectures rather than publisher-generated video lectures? Can student attrition be reduced by using instructor-generated video lectures rather than publisher-generated video lectures? Can teaching presence in the form of instructor-generated video lectures predict student success in an online college algebra course? Two college algebra courses from a university in the Midwestern United States were used for the research; a college algebra course using publisher-generated video lectures and one using instructor-generated video lectures. The research lasted two years and included sixty-nine students in the publisher-generated video lecture course and eighty-seven students in the instructor-generated video lecture course. Two-thirds of the students in this study were female in both the publisher-generated and instructor-generated video lecture courses. Data results indicated that students in the instructor-generated video lecture college algebra courses not only performed better on all assessments, but that course attrition was significantly lower than in the publisher-generated video lecture course. Hegeman further comments that for a student to be successful and persist in the online course environment, the student must be willing to devote time to learning course material, but also, the instructor must include design techniques and activities that create a strong teaching presence in the course.

In addition to motivational interaction with students encouraging student persistence, instructional design also influences students completing a course. Hixon, Buckenmeyer, and Barczyk (2015) found through their research, that the design of a course may result in

satisfaction of the course, better learning, and course retention. Using the Quality Matters criteria in the design of a 68-statement survey, the researchers electronically surveyed 183 undergraduate students from a Midwestern public university. Seventy-five percent of students in this study were female and represented a wide range of ages. Students indicated the importance of each statement using a 4-point scale. The questionnaire also included items on course satisfaction, perceptions of online courses, and demographics. In the study, the statement rated by students as the most important was, "Clear instructions tell me how to get started and how to find various course components." It is believed by the researchers that students believe it is crucial to be able to locate and understand the structure of the online course. In closing remarks by Hixon and colleagues (2015), referring to this study, they believe, "When faculty are trained, and quality elements are built into the design of a course, students derive a high-quality experience that may result in increased satisfaction, learning, and retention" (p. 30).

As discussed earlier, an instructor's immediacy, methods used to decrease psychological distance between instructor and student (Baker, 2010), is a predictor of student success. Gaytan (2015) also discovered that it may decrease student attrition in the online environment. In a qualitative study, he interviewed current online students to find critical factors that affect attrition and compared the results to faculty responses. Among the findings, Gaytan discovered the two most critical factors to encourage persistence from a student perspective were: more instruction from the instructor as well as more quality feedback to help them improve performance. Each of these factors provide frequent and rich communication to students as well as attentiveness by the instructor, all necessary components of immediacy (Baker, 2010; Eom & Ashill, 2016).

Self-determination and Persistence

The implementation of autonomy, competence, and relatedness within the theory of self-determination appears to be at the heart of successful teacher social presence in the online classroom. As instructors work to build teacher social presence through better instructional design, facilitation, and direct instruction, students are more intrinsically motivated to perform well, be more satisfied with the course experience, and remain enrolled (Gaytan, 2015; Marshik et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This motivation can be attributed to the instructor's use, consciously or subconsciously, of the self-determination theory.

Using the concepts of autonomy, competency, and relatedness in his research, Nichols (2010) compared retention results during two semesters, one semester without specific course retention interventions, and one with course retention interventions. In the first semester, without course retention interventions, twenty-eight students from Laidlaw College in New Zealand, who had withdrawn from the course were surveyed. Of these 28 students, 15 were then interviewed. During the second semester, course retention interventions were put in place. At the end of the semester, twenty-three students from the second semester course who had successfully completed their online course and had the retention interventions were surveyed, with 15 of these students involved in a follow-up interview. Results concluded that students in the first semester course with no interventions withdrew from the course based on external factors such as family matters, work, or social commitments. Whereas, the second semester students who had interventions implemented into their course cited intrinsic reasons for their persistence. Nichols found the interventions from the instructor and the university during the second semester, appeared to motivate students to continue. Students also acknowledged that their motivation was encouraged through relationships built with tutors and student support departments which helped

them increase the belief in their ability, or competency, to complete and pass the course. These results were later supported by Goldman and Brann's (2016) claim that supporting the psychological needs of the self-determination theory in the online course environment are imperative to student success.

In their study, Goldman and Brann (2016) asked 119 participants (59 males, 60 females) from a large Mid-Atlantic university enrolled in communications studies courses at the undergraduate level, to complete an open-ended survey after being given definitions of autonomy, competency, and relatedness based on Ryan and Deci's theory of self-determination. Eighty-eight percent of the sample was European American and ranged in age from 18 to 24. Participants were asked to provide up to three written narratives describing their experiences with instructors' fulfillment of these needs. There were 210 examples of autonomy, 177 examples of competence, and 179 examples of relatedness collected. From the results, Goldman and Brann found that instructors have a strong influence on affecting a student's psychological needs based on pedagogical decisions, teacher-student interactions, and teacher behaviors. Goldman and Brann believe that meeting these psychological needs help encourage intrinsic motivation within students, allowing them to experience greater success in the course as well as develop a commitment to the course.

On the other hand, it is also important to recognize what happens to student persistence when online instructors do not integrate teacher social presence within the online course environment. In a study by Lee, Choi, and Kim (2013), it was found that students in the online environment who felt influenced and controlled by external factors, and lacking an internal locus of control, were more likely to drop out of a course than students who were encouraged in their internal locus of control through the fostering of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Youngiu and colleagues' conclusion correlates with studies done by both Dollinger (2000) and Anderson, Turner, Heath, and Payne (2016).

As instructors prepare curriculum and teach asynchronous online courses, they should be encouraged to integrate self-determination theory into their course design, their facilitation during the course, and in their direct instruction to improve teacher social presence which encourages student satisfaction and persistence in the online course environment (Reeve, 2002). This inclusion of teacher social presence is especially important for those teaching developmental asynchronous online courses. By considering whether students in developmental asynchronous online courses have additional struggles that instructors can meet will add to the knowledge base regarding the needs of these students.

Developmental Asynchronous Online Courses

As stated earlier, the key to successful online courses and persistence in these courses, whether synchronous or asynchronous, appears to lie in the implementation of teacher social presence in course development, facilitation of the course, and in the direct instruction of the course (Anderson et al., 2001; Crawford & Persaud, 2013; Samuel, 2015). This is particularly important in the developmental asynchronous online environment where many students are placed.

Developmental Courses

Researchers have suggested that schools offer intervention prior to beginning college level work allowing students to be prepared for academic success (Conley, 2005; Cunningham, Redmond, & Merisotis, 2003). Remedial, or developmental courses, are used more than any other support, to address the academic struggles of college students (Bettinger, 2013). Their purpose is to target underprepared students and provide them with the tools and skills necessary

to be successful in college-level work. Hodara (2016) points out that the percent of college freshmen placed in these developmental courses is an indicator of general student preparedness for college work. Determination of student placement in these courses is usually decided by a type of placement test independently regulated by each university (Goldwasser & Harris, 2017). Bettinger (2013) estimates that about 92 percent of colleges and universities use standardized placement exams to determine student assignment to developmental courses. Most of these universities restrict enrollment into college-level courses until course remediation is complete. Upon evaluating the results of standardized placement tests determining academic standing for incoming first year students, research shows that more than 30% of students need developmental courses (Bettinger, 2013; Skomsvold, 2014). A study by Chen and Simone (2016) surveyed students in 2003-2004, again in 2006, and finally in 2009, and discovered that during the period between 2003 and 2009, 68 percent of those starting at public two-year institutions and 40 percent of those starting at public four-year institutions took at least one developmental course even though many of their standardized placement tests did not require it.

Specifically, within the University of Alaska System, just over 46 percent of first-time first year students enrolled in one or more developmental courses during fall 2015 (UA Institutional Research, Planning, and Analysis, 2016). The placement of students in these developmental courses is done according to standardized placemegaynt tests such as the SAT and ACT. If scores do not meet university minimums, students are required to take the ACCUPLACER to determine placement (Hodara, 2016).

As universities strive to meet the developmental needs of students, they have discovered most students needing remediation are no longer considered the traditional college student. These students typically have busy schedules, family responsibilities, and full- or part-time jobs

and are enrolling in universities at a faster pace than the traditional 18- to 24-year old group (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). This means that time is at a premium and there may not be the opportunity to schedule a face-to-face course in the middle of a frenzied day (Watson & Gemin, 2008). Also, many universities fail to offer face-to-face courses at a time convenient for this population of students (C. Stuive, personal communication, November 15, 2018). Because of these scheduling conflicts, most universities are currently offering the option of taking these remedial courses using the online environment; specifically, the asynchronous online environment.

Students in Developmental Online Courses

It is an unfortunate reality that many students begin their college careers academically underprepared for the rigors of college work and must enroll in developmental courses. These students, both traditional and non-traditional, have individual characteristics that place them in these classes. As young people graduate high school and enter the college environment, they are oftentimes categorized as academically at-risk and needing remedial courses (Castillo, 2013).

Traditional students. Traditional students are defined as entering college shortly after graduating high school and attempting college as a full-time student (Davidson & Wilson, 2015). These traditional students who are placed into remedial courses are aware of their academic deficiencies and have little confidence in their ability to succeed in college. In fact, the primary barriers these traditional students face in developmental courses are their deficits in writing, reading, and study skills (Castillo, 2013).

Chen and Simone (2016), in their Statistical Analysis Report, state that many high school graduates going directly into the college environment must be placed into developmental courses, likely because there is misalignment between high school and college standards. Crisp

and Delgado (2014) also report that recent high school graduates who score low on placement tests, do so based on the low number of courses taken, and difficulty level of high school courses prior to college enrollment.

These underprepared students lack confidence, self-motivation and efficacy, and often struggle with the ability to use their time wisely (Travers, 2016). Yet, with these challenges, many choose to take their developmental courses through the online environment, presenting a very difficult performance challenge for students since most of them received their earlier education strictly through the traditional face-to-face setting and are not prepared for the adaptation challenge they encounter through the online environment (Xu & Jaggars, 2013).

Flynn (2016) believes that when underprepared students who lack the psychological skills as well as the academic skills to succeed in a developmental course, choose to take the course online, they are setting themselves up for failure. In fact, Flynn (2016) goes so far as to suggest that these students may eventually develop a "shame-based sense of self, an inability to ask for help, and eventually the abandonment of the college/career dream" (p. 131).

Nontraditional students. Another group of students who enroll in developmental courses are those defined as nontraditional students. Nontraditional students are those who have at least one of the following factors: (a) part-time student, works a full-time job, (b) is financially independent of parent support, (c) has dependents other than their spouse, (d) is a single parent, (e) is delayed in their postsecondary enrollment, or (f) has no high school diploma (Kim, 2002; Travers, 2016). These students are often handling family responsibilities, work related schedules, and financial pressures (Flynn, 2016), and tend to see themselves as employees first, students second, but have decided to enroll in college classes in spite of busy schedules (Chen, 2014).

Because these nontraditional students are typically older, they face different issues than the traditional student. They must find a balance between maintaining a family, earning a living, and scheduling time for their education (Ross-Gordon, 2011), making family and financial responsibilities two significant hurdles to obtaining their education according to the Lumina Foundation (Erisman & Steele, 2012). Lumina Foundation grantees also consistently identified fear of failure as a third obstacle to college success. These students found that returning to school brought with it the fear of unfamiliar technology, re-learning study skills, and figuring out the many administrative complexities of their campus (Erisman & Steele, 2012).

Despite anticipated struggles for these nontraditional learners, 74 percent of students enrolled in postsecondary institutions are defined as nontraditional in some way (USDE, 2015). And, looking ahead, the enrollment of these students within the nontraditional category is predicted to rise faster than that of traditional students. The National Center for Education Statistics (Hussar & Bailey, 2011), in their *Projections of Education Statistics to 2020* report, predicts that between 2009 and 2020, there will be an increase of traditional students of 9 percent. However, 25-34-year-old growth is predicted to be 21 percent and those over 35 years old will see a growth rate of 16 percent. Despite this predicted influx of nontraditional students, many universities are slow to make changes to meet the needs of this group of students and remain focused on the traditional students, forcing the nontraditional student to find their way in an academic environment that does not provide for their academic needs, therefore, lowering this groups' success rate (Dauer & Absher, 2015). In fact, Phil Regier (2014), Executive Vice Provost of Arizona State University is quoted as saying, "…we must acknowledge that online learning provides by far the best and most feasible alternative for students who are balancing

work and family as well as a myriad of other obligations. The nontraditional student simply cannot excel in an inflexible, face-to-face classroom environment" (p. 75).

With the increase of nontraditional students in the college environment, there is also an increase in the number of students needing remedial courses. Many of these nontraditional students have been absent from formal education for many years and are not accustomed to the current learning environment. And, although they enter college often with stronger life problem solving skills than the traditional student, they can possess fewer academic skills to help them succeed (Dauer & Absher, 2015). To make their journey in education more difficult, many of these nontraditional students struggled in high school classes and come underprepared for college level courses, placing them in one or more remedial classes because of their challenges with foundational writing and math (Erisman & Steele, 2012; Travers, 2016). These students who have delayed entering college immediately following high school were found to be placed in remediation classes more often than younger, traditional students (Chen & Simone, 2016; Crisp & Nora, 2010).

Like traditional students in need of remedial courses, nontraditional students also find the online environment inviting because of the flexibility. For many of these students, the online format is not only appealing for them to continue post-secondary education, but necessary if they are to take classes since generally they are juggling multiple life events that add to the complexities of furthering their education (Thompson, Miller, & Pomykal Franz, 2013; Travers, 2016). The lack of preparedness of many students, along with other characteristics like external, internal, and curriculum struggles can negatively impact learning, influence attrition, and impede completion of programs (Travers, 2016).

Student Factors and Attrition Rates in Online Classes

Considering the online environment, course enrollments have grown quickly over the last decade (Allen & Seaman, 2017). Despite the interest and higher enrollment in online course registration, retention within this environment continues to be of major concern and a barrier to the continued growth of online instruction for universities (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

Before universities can successfully address the high attrition problems in online courses, they must first understand why students drop out of courses. Classifying retention obstacles was first organized by Cross in 1981 under the headings of situational, dispositional, and institutional obstacles (McMahon, 2013). Currently, many authors use the terms environmental factors, student factors, and curriculum factors to describe the same obstacles introduced by Cross. One or any combination of these obstacles can have an adverse effect on a student's motivation to continue in a course. Street's (2010) research supports this concept when it was found that a student's decision to persist or drop out of a class was influenced by family support and other environmental circumstances in a student's day-to-day life. Student, or personal factors such as self-determination and time management, and course factors such as course design and instructional presence also influenced a student's decision.

Although each of the three factors may contribute to student success or withdrawal from a course, Lee et al., (2013) found student factors have the most influence on student attrition. These student factors include locus of control and self-regulation. Locus of control refers to a student's belief that outcomes are based on personal control and decisions made, referred to as internal locus of control, whereas, a loss of that control to external circumstances is considered an external locus of control (Lee et al., 2013). This locus of control is related to the theory of self-determination in that autonomy and competency, key components to self-determination,

affect whether a student maintains internal or external locus of control. Self-regulation, another student factor studied by Lee and colleagues, refers to the students' ability to manage time, self-evaluate, set goals, and self-motivate as they navigate their educational experiences (Kitsantas, 2013).

In the Lee et al. (2013) study, 169 online students at the Korea National Open University were surveyed. Of the students in the study, 116 completed the course and 53 dropped out after the add/drop period. Two online surveys measured time and study management, self-regulation, self-efficacy, locus of control, and family and work support. The surveys totaled 27 items, and each was administered during two different times in the semester, one at the beginning of the semester, and one at the end. The survey administered at the end of the semester was given to both students who completed the course and those who withdrew. Results from the study showed that persistent students scored higher than those who dropped out in areas of self-regulation, time and environment management, and an academic internal locus of control with no difference between the two groups regarding family and work commitments. It was concluded that an external locus of control and low self-regulation, within the "student factor" reasons for dropping a course are the most important reasons influencing attrition rates of students.

The student factor obstacle, leading to course attrition, was also revealed in an earlier historical study by Demetriou and Schmitz-Sciborski (2011). In their reading, Demetriou and Schmitz-Sciborski reviewed many earlier studies to find many motivational theories to support the idea that a student's persistence and attrition are directly related to student internal factors such as goal setting, autonomy, competency, self-efficacy, and motivational orientations. When students lack these positive motivating student factors, students are more susceptible to environmental and curriculum factors influencing their ability to persist.

Finally, a phenomenological study by Brown, Hughes, Keppell, Hard, and Smith (2015) concurred with the importance of student factors being the impetus behind student attrition or persistence in the online environment. In their study, Brown and fellow researchers, focused on the experiences of a purposive sample of students who were first-time distance learners. These students were interviewed and video recorded providing their points of view on their online experiences. Of the 144 volunteers, 20 were selected to broadly represent both geographical and demographic diversity. With a reflective open-ended prompt each week, students were encouraged to share, via video recordings, five-minute reflections from the past week. Upon analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process, the study found five themes emerged: motivating factors, inhibiting factors, importance of support, study approaches, and retrospective thoughts. Of the 20 students who began the study, 8 dropped the course before the semester ended. It was discovered that the students who dropped the course struggled with motivation and a lack of an internal locus of control, both key determinants of success within the domain of student factors.

It would appear, that although environmental factors, student factors, and curriculum factors each play a role in the attrition rates of online courses, student factors which include locus of control, motivation, self-efficacy, self-regulation, and autonomy shape how a student will be able to navigate through the struggles with the external, or environmental factors as well as curriculum factors that students face during each semester of online courses (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Meyer, 2014). A student's internal factors then, are directly related to persistence in the online environment, but a gap in the literature exists with students enrolled in developmental asynchronous online courses within the unique student body attending the University of Alaska.

Conclusion

Online education has continued to grow as an alternative to the traditional face-to-face classroom as the nontraditional student population increases (Allen & Seaman, 2017; Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2013). Within the online setting, many students choose the asynchronous option because of the flexibility and ease of scheduling coursework around already demanding schedules. The attrition rate is high for this student population, and higher for students placed in developmental courses who choose the asynchronous online environment.

Research done by Xu and Jaggars (2011, 2014) noted that students who are less prepared often struggle with online coursework and withdraw at higher rates than academically prepared students, older students, and underprepared students in face-to-face courses. Jaggars and Stacey (2014) suggest that the traditional method of developmental education is not achieving its intended purpose of preparing students for college level courses within the online environment. Furthermore, Bork and Rucks-Ahidiana (2013) found that faculty expect learners to arrive in the course with full knowledge of online skill sets and should not be expected to teach these skills. Most of the time however, student in developmental courses enroll with little, or no knowledge of online skill sets.

Many suggest the solutions to attrition are providing better support services and more control on which students can register for online courses (Cochran, Campbell, Baker, & Leeds, 2013; Xu & Jaggars, 2014). Although important considerations, oftentimes these students have no alternatives but to take the courses online, regardless of their online skill set, and do not have the flexibility or time to use available support services. Therefore, instructor teaching presence is oftentimes the best support option for the geographically and demographically diverse student population attending college. This means, the instructor role must include teaching presence

within asynchronous online developmental courses to encourage autonomy, competency, and relatedness; leading to a strong internal locus of control, an increase in self-efficacy, and motivation to lower course attrition within these courses.

Many of the studies reviewed discussed teacher social presence in both the synchronous and asynchronous environments at both the undergraduate and graduate levels and their importance to student success and persistence. No studies were found that focused on whether teacher social presence makes a difference in the persistence of students in developmental courses taken asynchronously, nor were any studies found that sought to discover, from a student perspective, what teacher social presence might look like in this environment of predominantly non-traditional Alaskan students.

This study focused on the gaps in the literature addressing asynchronous online attrition rates, specifically in developmental courses, by examining if student suggested teacher presence and care strategies, will increase self-determination of students, and increase student motivation, thus lowering attrition rates at the University of Alaska.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

This study sought to discover components that might be factors in the attrition of students enrolled in asynchronous online developmental courses through student responses that will help answer the following research question: What implemented teacher care strategies, defined by students, might improve student self-determination and thus lower attrition in developmental asynchronous online courses at University of Alaska campuses? This chapter will include an overview of the methodology, the setting where the research will take place and rationale for its selection, the participants and the criteria in their selection, data collection and procedures, data analysis, trustworthiness, limitations of the methodology, expected findings, and ethical issues that may arise seeking answers to the research question.

Methodological Overview

To learn how the experiences of students enrolled in asynchronous online developmental college courses affects attrition rates, a qualitative method using a phenomenological design to research was used, as it incorporates the lived experience of students to determine why they do what they do (Creswell, 2013, 2014). The qualitative method is the most effective for this study because it focuses on "discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied and offers the greatest promise of making a difference in people's lives" (Merriam, 2009, p. 1). Creswell (2013) adds that qualitative research includes the "voices of the participants" (p. 44).

Within the qualitative method, the phenomenological approach emphasizes research findings by interviewing and learning individual's stories as well as going deeper into trying to

discover the experiences lived by the interviewee (van Manen, 1990; van Manen, Higgins, & Riet, 2016).

Phenomenological Methodology

The qualitative research approach, phenomenology, was developed as an objection to the positivist paradigm. Positivism, with its roots in orderly, rational, and logical reality was thought to be useful in the scientific community as well as the social community (Aliyu, Bello, Kasim, & Martin, 2014; Reiners, 2012). While positivism's approach that truth and reality are independent of the human experience and is objective, phenomenology responds that truth and reality are dependent on a person's interpretation and grounded in the human experience (Aliyu et al., 2014; Gray, 2009).

Phenomenology is an attempt to describe experiences from the meanings people generate (Sokolowski, 2000). Creswell (2013) defines phenomenology as "describing the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (p. 76). Put another way, it is an exploration of a phenomenon based on the experiences within a group of individuals (Creswell, 2013). Its goal is for a better understanding of the meanings of the everyday experiences of our world and making these meanings observable without quantitatively classifying or coding these experiences, but by describing them (Vagle, 2014, van Manen, 1990). Phenomenologists believe that knowledge is gained through the interactions between the participant and the researcher and is subjective and inductive (Padilla-Diaz, 2015; Reiners, 2012; van Manen, 2014).

Most philosophical thoughts and ideas that have been developed have both their proponents and those who challenge them. Phenomenology is no different. The founder of the phenomenological movement, Edmund Husserl developed descriptive phenomenology (Kafle,

2011; Padilla-Diaz, 2015). This view attempts to describe the deeper meanings of a person's lived experience, without preconceived opinions of the researcher being connected. It allows the investigator to transcend or to be removed from the ideas being investigated and to be objective toward the meanings of the experience being expressed (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). This setting aside, or bracketing, is the process of removing viewpoints and assumptions, or at least becoming aware of them, about the phenomenon being described by the researcher so the experience is seen as it truly is (Merriam, 2009).

Martin Heidegger, a former student of Husserl, opposed Husserl's philosophy of bracketing (Reiners, 2012; Sokolowski, 2000) and believed we understand the world around us by our personal interpretations of it and the researcher should not remove or bracket themselves from others' experiences since the participant's experience becomes intermeshed with the researcher's experience (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Heidegger believed neutrality was impossible and the researcher, through sharing of knowledge, shares the experience (Reiners, 2012). Therefore, Heidegger's philosophy of phenomenology seeks to find the meaning of a phenomenon rather than describing the phenomenon under study as Husserl's descriptive phenomenology does (Reiners, 2012).

As students continue to be frustrated with their struggles in online courses, they have little opportunity to share these frustrations with those who can empathize and offer solutions. They often feel isolated from other students and the instructor and might believe nothing is going to help them in their efforts to persist in the online environment. The phenomenological methodology could offer students the chance to share their voices about their lived experiences in their developmental asynchronous online courses.

The phenomenological methodology was the best method to inform this study of the attrition of asynchronous online developmental students as it seeks to explore and understand the lived experiences of a group of people who have shared the same phenomena (Creswell, 2013) by finding out, not *what* they decided about dropping an online course, but *how* they experienced their decision-making (Vagle, 2014). It was an opportunity to learn about the experiences students encountered that drove their decision. With this as an objective, students were given the opportunity to verbalize past involvement in developmental asynchronous online courses.

Since Heidegger's phenomenological perspective of including the researcher's experience was used in the study, rather than bracketing, the researcher was able to share in, and tried to understand the lived experience of the group of people surveyed rather than as an objective collector of data (Creswell, 2013; Reiners, 2012; Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Because this research project involved a researcher who has been both an online student and an online instructor, it was important for the researcher to be allowed to have preconceived opinions and ideas as well as be a part of the phenomenon (Reiners, 2012).

When students drop a course, there is an emotional element involved (Fetzner, 2013). Students are often anxious, discouraged, frustrated, alone, feel irresponsible, and feel like a failure (Oh & Lee, 2016). Using the phenomenological methodology removes the sterile collection of data and encourages communication and freedom to express oneself. This is done by sharing stories both objectively and subjectively through interviews allowing students to be heard by someone who is not only seeking data but obtaining information from a caring and thoughtful perspective. As van Manen writes (1990), "Indeed, if there is one word that most aptly characterizes phenomenology itself, then this word is 'thoughtfulness'" (p. 12).

Phenomenologists realize that doing research is necessary because of the everyday practical concerns educators have for students (van Manen, 1990; Vagle, 2014). The research is not studying the student, or the decision the student makes exclusively, the researcher studies the relationship between the two and the emotions that bring the two together (Vagle, 2014).

Lived Experiences

The lived experience of others is rather personal and private and is not necessarily easy to share. Struggles, failures, and accomplishments are normally shared with those whom relationships have been built and trust has been created. When the researcher has a relationship with those being interviewed, respondents are much more open to trusting and being able to share.

Phenomenology focuses on sharing "lived experiences" or "stories" in a relational environment (Creswell, 2013) by focusing on what the lived experience is like (van Manen, 1990). As van Manen (1990) points out, "The aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful" (p. 36). In this research project, the lived experiences were full of emotion and personal interpretations regarding what led the student to drop an online course, providing a different type of information than quantitative data might gather. This relational environment between the student and the researcher benefits the researcher in the gathering of data as well as hopefully making students more comfortable with the interview.

Exploring Experiences

The phenomenological method of research encourages active participation by the researcher in the sharing of knowledge and their experiences within the interview process

(Porsanger, 2004, Sloan & Bowe, 2014). This gives the researcher the opportunity to share in and try to understand the lived experiences of those questioned rather than being an objective collector of data (Creswell, 2013; Reiners, 2012; Sloan & Bowe, 2014).

The phenomenological methodology is not interested in describing phenomenon as much as it is interested in exploring the experiences of students (O'Leary, 2014; Vagle, 2014). Working with students who have struggled with attrition in online courses and exploring their lived experiences is more helpful than a limited description of the experience.

Phenomenology also encourages the participants to be joint contributors to the findings with the researcher (Boylorn, 2008; Caxaj, 2015; Moustakas, 1994). This is especially important since participants want to know their experiences and perspectives are valid and can make a marked difference in how future courses are designed.

Sampling Design

In the proposed phenomenological study, the non-probability sampling procedure of purposive selection was used because it allows the researcher to intentionally select a group of individuals to help the researcher discover, understand, and gain insight into the research problem being examined (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Purposive selection also allows the sample to be chosen based on relevance to the research (Schwandt, 2015). In fact, Creswell (2012) describes the qualitative method being used to explore the phenomenon deeply and therefore choosing participants representative of the topic being explored. More specifically, within the purposive sampling strategy, criterion-based sampling is used in which a sample is chosen based on a particular life experience (Palys, 2008). In this case, students who have taken developmental asynchronous online courses within the University of Alaska system were selected because of its academic setting and students of interest (Maxwell, 2013). The sample

frame consisted of students who were enrolled in at least one developmental asynchronous online course previously taught by the researcher within the University of Alaska system between fall 2016 and fall 2018; also, they had been enrolled in at least one other developmental asynchronous online course taught by an instructor other than the researcher.

As a snapshot of attendance at the university, during the fall semester of 2017, there were 27,823 students in attendance among all campuses within the University of Alaska system. Of these students, 58% were female and 42% were male. The student population was 58% White, 16% Alaska Native, 8% Asian, 3.5% African American, 1.6% Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander, with 13% of students not reporting race. Of the total student population, 50.5% were over 25 (UA Institutional Research, Planning, and Analysis University of Alaska, 2018). This is higher than the national average of 39% reported by the National Center for Education Statistics in 2016.

The University of Alaska system provides post-secondary education to students in both urban and rural communities. From the fall of 2008 to spring of 2012, 72% of students were from urban communities, while 28% were rural communities (Hodara & Cox, 2016).

The University of Alaska System was chosen for this study because (a) over 46% of students entering the university as freshmen are in need of developmental courses (UA Institutional Research, Planning, and Analysis University of Alaska, 2016), (b) because of the remote location of many students, the online format is often the only option these students have, (c) the researcher has accessibility to former students who have taken developmental asynchronous online courses, and (d) the researcher is a faculty member and is familiar with the structure and technologies of University of Alaska's online programs.

Former students from past courses with the researcher were invited to participate in the study through e-mail communication. Padilla-Diaz (2015) suggests up to 15 participants and Creswell (2013) suggests up to 25 participants need to participate in the study in order to reach saturation. This study included 30 participants who were interviewed. These students had experienced the online course environment taking developmental asynchronous courses at the University of Alaska and were able to convey their lived experiences within the online environment (Creswell, 2013). The sample included students who have had any of the following experiences of the phenomenon being studied (Englander, 2012): (a) those who have successfully completed developmental asynchronous online courses (b) those who dropped a course by officially withdrawing (c) and those who remained enrolled but stopped doing coursework during the first half of the semester, thus failing the course.

The sampling frame consisting of students enrolled in previous online asynchronous developmental courses with the researcher was used based on Maxwell's (2013) goal of choosing participants with whom a relationship has been or can be developed between the researcher and the participants. Former students, rather than currently enrolled students were selected because of the importance of past relationships and a reduced role of power distribution over the student because students are no longer enrolled in the researcher's courses (Karnieli-Miller, Strier, & Pessach, 2009). Having a past relationship between the researcher and the interviewee during the interview process offers a more comfortable environment that can provide data richer in content than those interviews where no relationship exists (Maxwell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

Glesne and Peshkin (1992) use the word "rapport" to describe the necessary relationship between the researcher and the informant. Rapport reduces distance and anxiety, and builds trust

between persons, but allows the researcher to keep an emotional distance from the students being interviewed. By interviewing former students, the interviewer has an established rapport with students and may be able to reduce any anxiety of the student as well as affirm the motive of the relationship goes beyond a means to collect data.

Data Collection

Prior to collecting data, an initial letter (Appendix A) was emailed to students seeking their involvement in the research. Once the researcher received a response, a follow up letter (Appendix B) was emailed with further instructions to complete the questionnaire.

All the data collection; the questionnaire and the one-to-one interviews was done using Internet technology rather than through face-to-face interactions. Online interviewing is a common method of interviewing and is supported with research findings by Shapka, Domene, and Khan (2016), who determined, "semi-structured online interviews can be viewed as equivocal to in-person interviews in terms of data integrity and quality despite differences the number of words produced or interview duration" (p. 364).

Questionnaire

An online questionnaire (Appendix D) using SurveyMonkey was developed to obtain demographic information.

When the participant opened the online questionnaire, they read the confidentiality and informed consent page (Appendix C) and then were asked to click a box consenting to participate prior to beginning the questionnaire.

The online questionnaire requested the participant's name and email for future interview scheduling and asked for demographic information of each student which helped to better understand their one-to-one interview responses (Englander, 2012).

Interviews

In a phenomenological methodology, data is predominately collected using interviews to discover the experiences of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The purpose of interviews when using this qualitative method is to understand the themes of lived experience from the subject's perspective (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Interview questions are designed with both a thematic and dynamic dimension.

Thematic questions rely on the "what" in the interview and produce knowledge while the dynamic dimension is interested in the "how" of the interview and promotes relationships and the course of the conversation (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). According to Moustakas (1994), the interview utilizes a conversational and informal process "aimed at evoking a comprehensive account of the person's experience of the phenomenon" allowing an "openness to changes of sequence and forms of questions in order to follow up on the specific answers given and the stories told by subjects" (p. 150).

The interviews are conversationally semi-structured and open-ended allowing the researcher to make decisions in the interview process as to how deep to question based on the comfort level of students (O'Leary, 2014). If in the interview, the researcher senses a student feeling uncomfortable with the interaction, the interviewer can make the questioning more guided so the student feels more at ease with the questioning. If the student appears more interactive, the questioning can move into areas that may provide richer information.

Open-ended interview questions allow the interviewee to offer details and emotional descriptions of lived experience by allowing free-form answers. One of the most important advantages of using open-ended questions is they allow the interviewer the opportunity to obtain unexpected data from participants. They are also beneficial because they give the participant

more freedom to express their thoughts potentially providing richer data (Fowler, 2014; O'Leary, 2014).

Open-ended questions not only help to create a more conversational and relaxing interview by permitting the participant to share beyond a short, concise answer, but also allow the construction of knowledge within the interaction. The interviewer and participants act in relation to each other and influence one another (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; O'Leary, 2014). Because the interview is also semi-structured, it allows the interviewer the freedom to ask additional questions to clear up any ambiguity.

This primary method of collecting data is not done in an objective format of questions being asked and then answered but is based on sharing knowledge through conversation by a relational positioning of the researcher as a participant. This dynamic dimension promotes a positive conversational style interview revolving around emotions and experiences (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). These conversations are often called 'stories' as the discussion moves into lived experiences of both the researcher and the participant. These stories claim authority by the very fact they are the lived experiences being told (Caxaj, 2015).

One-to-one online interviews. The one-to-one interview (Appendix E) was done using Internet technology rather than face-to-face. Online interviewing has been growing in popularity amongst researchers (James & Busher, 2012; O'Connor, Madge, Shaw, & Wellens, 2008) and worked well in this study because many of the students interviewed live in remote areas where meeting face-to-face would be impossible (Nehls, Smith, & Schneider, 2015). Using the online interview also provided flexibility and increased participation as well as allowed the participant the right to withdraw from the interview process with the click of a button (Janghorban, Roudsari, & Taghipour, 2014).

More specifically, the one-to-one online interview utilized "real time" audio and/or video communication between the researcher and participant. The specific software used for the interviews was Zoom! Zoom! is a subscription-based service chosen because it is simple to use, allows the recording of video and audio within the software for later transcription, as well as ensuring confidentiality through its password protected meeting space. It is also available for use on computers, phones, and tablets which "allow both the researcher and the researched to participate in their own space, at their own pace and at the time of their choosing" (James, 2007, p. 17). This not only allows the interview to take place where the interviewee feels the most comfortable, but also allows the previous online developed relationship to continue (Nehls, Smith, & Schneider, 2015). Since the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee has always been online, changing to a face-to-face interview can be awkward for both the interviewer and interviewee. These interviews lasted between 20 and 30 minutes.

In contrast, the online audio/video interview does have the disadvantage of technological struggles. Both the researcher and the interviewee must be well-versed in the use of computer technology as well as be able to access equipment necessary for using Zoom! software. The needed equipment includes a computer capable of running the software, a webcam, and microphone (Nehls, Smith, & Schneider, 2015).

Data Analysis

In the phenomenological methodology, there are specific, well-structured methods designed to analyze data, especially by Moustakas (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The method of analysis for this research followed the modification by Moustakas of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method (Moustaka, 1994). This method was chosen for its practical and useful approach to analyzing the data collected as well as its unique and step-by-step method of

analyzing data (Creswell, 2013). It is also a form of analysis which allows the researcher to be the first informant as an included participant in the study prior to data collection from others (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

This simplified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method (Creswell, 2013; Chun, 2013; Moustakas, 1994) and the chronological order in which each step is completed follows:

1. Describe the researcher's personal experience of the phenomenon. By reflecting on the researcher's experience, one becomes aware of underlying feelings about the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). This is not an attempt to bracket, or separate the researcher's experiences and focus solely on the participants, but is a way to reflect on the researcher's past personal experiences and interpret the participants' experiences, called reflexivity, to aid in data analysis (Sloan & Bowe, 2014) by sharing knowledge which allows the researcher to embrace the depth and breadth of the analysis (Reiners, 2012).
2. Interview participants in the study and consider each statement as equal, called horizontalizing, and build a list of significant statements.
3. Group the significant statements into larger units, or themes.
4. Create a description of the experiences, or what happened to the participants in the experience. This is also called textural description and includes verbatim participant examples.
5. The textural description is then examined from different perspectives in order to write a description of how the participants experienced the phenomenon.
6. The composite textural-structural description discovered represents the meaning of the experience and tells the reader what was experienced and how they experienced it.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, the term trustworthiness, or truthfulness, which corresponds to validity and reliability within quantitative research (Creswell, 2013; Englander, 2012), is used to describe the rigors of this phenomenological study and a way to establish confidence that the voices of the participants are being heard. To ensure trustworthiness, Guba (1981) elaborated on four criteria: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility establishes that the research findings are reasonable, believable, and are a correct interpretation of the original data collected from the participants (Anney, 2014; Guba & Lincoln, 1982). To establish credibility within this study, member checking was used (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). According to Guba and Lincoln (1982), the member check is the "single most important action inquirers can take, for it goes to the heart of the credibility criterion" (p. 85). Member checks are an opportunity to ask for feedback from interviewed participants to confirm the meaning of what was transcribed in the interview process and to avoid any bias or misinterpretations (Merriam, 2009). This not only allows participants to concur with, or question the interpretation of the interview, but to also fine-tune their perspectives.

Dependability

Dependability is a second criterion when building trustworthiness and traditionally assures that the research findings can be duplicated. But, when dealing with human behavior, replication will never yield the same results (Merriam, 2009). In fact, Guba and Lincoln (1982) say researchers "must make allowance for apparent instabilities arising either because different realities are being tapped or because of instrumental shifts" (p. 86). Dependability can best be assured using an audit trail (Anney, 2014).

The audit trail, recommended by Guba and Lincoln (1982) occurs when the researcher accounts for all decisions and activities during the research gathering and analysis (Anney, 2014) to authenticate the findings of the study (Merriam, 2009) and show, convincingly, how the analysis was made. This can be done by keeping interview notes and all records collected as well as documenting each step in the collection and analysis of the data including coding and its application to the data. The audit trail also includes the researcher's running record of reflections of the research (Merriam, 2009).

The audit trail in this study included keeping electronic files of one-to-one interview transcripts and notes as well as questionnaire results. A journal of reflections, ideas, and coding methods was also kept. Journaling was done as interviews took place and throughout the coding process as student responses were explored and categorized.

Transferability

The third criterion used to establish truthfulness is transferability. This is the criterion that makes what happens in one research context applicable in another (Creswell, 2015). When discussing qualitative studies, Guba (1981) uses the term "transferability" as analogous with "generalizability" as it is applicable to alternative settings and populations (O'Leary, 2014). Transferability is an opportunity to transfer, to similar situations encountered, what was learned from the past (Merrriam, 2009; O'Leary, 2014). It is dependent on the researcher providing an audit trail of rich data and descriptions of the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1982) so others are able to make judgments as to the relevance to their own settings or contexts (Englander, 2012; Schwandt, 2015) and places the burden of applicability and connectedness on the person seeking to make use of the findings elsewhere to determine if extrapolation, or modest speculation, is possible (Merriam, 2009).

Besides the audit trail of thick description, purposive sampling adds to the transferability of the research by choosing a sample relevant to the research. Englander (2012) suggests choosing the purposive sample based on the question, "Do you have the experience I am looking for?" (p. 19). This method of selecting participants provides more in-depth data specific to the research question.

Confirmability

A final criterion for trustworthiness in research is confirmability. Confirmability, or objectivity, is guaranteed by methodology. According to Guba (1981), "If the methods are explicated, open to public scrutiny, replicable, and at least one step removed from direct investigator-subject contact, then objectivity is assured" (p. 81). In other words, the bias, or value judgment of the investigator must be removed to assure objectivity (Gray et al., 2007; Guba, 1981). This declares that conclusions are most likely based solely on observable phenomenon rather than influenced by emotions, prejudices, or subjectivities (O'Leary, 2014).

According to Guba (1981), confirmability can be achieved when the researcher employs an audit trail. As already noted, an audit trail makes it possible for others to fully examine the data collection and analysis by giving a running account of the process in the form of the investigator's journal (Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Maxwell, 2013; Schwandt, 2015).

Each of the four criteria: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability are necessary in qualitative research to better ensure trustworthiness in the current investigation of determining what implemented teacher care strategies, defined by students, might improve student self-determination and thus lower attrition in developmental asynchronous online courses at University of Alaska campuses.

Limitations of the Study

Although a phenomenological study provides rich and meaningful data gathered through the collection of the lived experiences of participants, there is a constant struggle with limitations within the study. The limitations within this study include lack of representativeness of the sample, personal bias during the research process, assuming honesty from participants, and inexperience of the researcher (Merriam, 2009).

A limitation may occur within the student sample of those who participated in the interviews. Since the students volunteered based on the researcher's email invitation, they only represent the student population motivated with a strong desire to be successful. The results could possibly be different if the sample included a more random group of participants. Because of the researcher being employed by the University of Alaska and having extensive online teaching experience, there might be some bias introduced into the study as an instructor despite all necessary precautions. Another possible limitation is the assumption that respondents were honest when sharing their lived experience in the individual interviews. It is hoped that those who were interviewed did not answer questions the way they believed the researcher wants them answered. Being honest and willing to disclose their lived experiences in asynchronous online courses is important since data collected is completely dependent on the accuracy of interviewee answers.

A final limitation is the lack of experience the researcher has in the development of the questionnaire and one-to-one interview questions. This lack of experience could produce incorrect scrutiny of the data and therefore produce inaccurate results (Merriam, 2009).

Expected Findings

As a current instructor in the developmental asynchronous environment, there are several expected findings foreseen in this study. First, it is likely that the primary struggle students will have in the online environment will center around a lack of relationship with the instructor. This will include immediacy of the response to student questions, keeping in touch with students, the clarity of the syllabus and website, and the communication within the online environment. It is also expected that students who are self-motivated will succeed in the online environment regardless of whether the instructor is weak in their online teaching and relational skills.

Ethical Issues

This study sought to examine the relationships built between the instructor and the students, self-determination of students, and the attrition rates among students enrolled in developmental asynchronous online courses at the University of Alaska through the use of a questionnaire and a one-to-one online interview. Since the research consisted of obtaining data from human subjects, there were several procedures put in place to make sure ethical concerns were satisfied. The proposal was submitted to the Institutional Review Board at the University of Alaska Fairbanks prior to any data collection to assess any potential risks to the participants. In addition to the Institutional Review Board application, participants signed an informed consent form agreeing to the conditions of the research (Creswell, 2014) which included an explanation of the study, the disclosure of any risk involved, the responsibility of confidentiality, and that the involvement in the research was voluntary which includes the freedom to withdraw at any time (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Schwandt, 2015). Participants were assured of the confidentiality of the data. Although names were linked to the demographic questionnaire in order to contact students for the one-to-one interviews, pseudonyms were assigned in the data

collection and analyses made public. Great care was taken to ensure protection against identification (O'Leary, 2014).

Conclusion

Working to receive a college education is a difficult endeavor that is even more challenging when other commitments compete for a student's time. Added to this struggle is the discouragement of being put in developmental courses because of a lack of preparation for college level work. All these difficulties, compounded together, make it hard to persist in a class to the end. In order to find a possible solution to keep students enrolled in developmental asynchronous online courses, it is important to find out the student's story behind their struggles.

It was proposed that the phenomenological methodology will best inform the study of the attrition of asynchronous online developmental students as it seeks to explore and understand the lived experiences of a group of people who have shared the same phenomena (Creswell, 2013) by finding out, not *what* they decided when dropping an online course, but *how* their lived experience guided their decision-making (Vagle, 2014). This research is an opportunity to learn about the experiences students encountered that drove their decision to drop or remain enrolled in an asynchronous online course. With this as an objective, students were given the opportunity to verbalize their past involvement in developmental asynchronous online courses.

Using the phenomenological method in the research, helpful solutions were found through the use of conversational, open-ended, semi-structured one-to-one online interviews to hear about student's lived experiences. Students became co-researchers as they participated and shared their own thoughts and ideas during the research process (NCAI Policy Research Center and MSU Center for Native Health Partnerships, 2012). Finally, the research was based on relationships between the students and the researcher as they both try to produce understanding

of lived experiences. By helping students reflect on past asynchronous online developmental course experiences, it is hoped that these students might help to define possible solutions to aid in the persistence of students enrolled in these online courses at the University of Alaska.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

With the popularity of online courses increasing, the challenges for students, instructors and universities continues. One challenge educators must face is how to keep students enrolled in the online course environment. Not only is the attrition rate among students in online courses higher than those same classes taught face-to-face (Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Brown, 2012; Clay, Rowland, & Packard, 2009; Willging & Johnson, 2009), the dropout rate of students enrolled in developmental online courses is often staggering. Because of the high attrition rates in developmental asynchronous online courses, a solution is necessary to help students complete their courses (Gering, 2017). Current research proposes the relationship between the instructor and student is often a determining factor in a student's persistence (Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012), yet the literature offers little as to what this relationship looks like and how to implement a student/instructor relationship in the online environment (Armellini & De Stefani, 2016).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to address the high attrition rate of developmental asynchronous online courses offered at the University of Alaska to determine whether the relationship between the instructor and the student had any bearing on a student's decision to remain enrolled in these courses. It also focused on finding out from a student perspective, what this relationship might look like. This was done using a phenomenological approach that guided the collection of data using a questionnaire for demographic information and personal interviews to discover the lived experiences of students (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; O'Leary, 2014; Schwandt, 2015; Sokolowski, 2000).

The interviews focused on obtaining a rich description of the struggles and challenges as well as positive experiences students had when enrolled in asynchronous online courses, specifically the instructor/student relationship. Participants were asked to tell their stories of past course experiences allowing them to verbalize frustrations and successes of their courses. By listening to the lived experiences of students who had been enrolled in past developmental asynchronous online courses at the University of Alaska, data was analyzed using the Moustakas modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method (Moustakas, 1994) because of its practical and useful approach as well as the step-by-step method it offered in the organization and definition of discovered themes (Creswell, 2013).

This chapter looks at the researcher's role in the study along with a description of the sample and an analysis of the data. Included with the analysis is a presentation of the data along with the themes discovered from the analysis.

Researcher's Role in the Study

Because the researcher is the primary instrument in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of the data, it is prudent to self-evaluate and discuss the researcher's role in this study, including any bias that may affect the analysis and interpretation. The following section includes the interest and personal stake in the project, motivation to research the topic, the background and experience with the project and finally, the researcher's role in the project

Interest and Personal Stake

The personal interest in this research comes from a desire to be part of a student's educational success story. After 27 years in the classroom at both the secondary and college level, this passion has not diminished. Seeing students succeed and accomplish their dreams has been encouraging in the face to face classroom and continues to be in the online environment.

Having written a thesis for an earlier master's degree and discovering how the relationship between the instructor and the student had a bearing on student academic performance, it made sense that this same type of positive student/instructor relationship might encourage student persistence in online courses.

Motivation to Research

As an online instructor of developmental asynchronous courses at the University of Alaska, personal experience has shown the dropout rate is exceptionally high in these courses. After checking with other instructors and researching other universities throughout the United States, their experience has also shown the dropout rate was consistently high for most asynchronous online courses. Research focused on solving this dropout problem by improving course design, educating instructors in the teaching of online courses, and helping students with better accountability options could reduce this dropout rate. Little research has been done on developmental asynchronous online courses, nor sought to discover from a student perspective, the cause of student course dropout and what could be done to lower this attrition rate.

Most students are enrolled in online courses because outside circumstances make it impossible to attend classes on campus. Those who drop out of these developmental online courses lose out on the pursuit of a degree since these courses must be completed before continuing to the next course. Being an instructor of these developmental asynchronous online courses and wanting to be a part of helping students realize their dreams, provides the motivation to be the best instructor possible and a part of helping these students move closer to their educational goals.

Background and Experience

As a past student and current instructor in the asynchronous online environment, there have been both challenging and positive experiences along the way. As a student there were a few situations where the instructor was not actively involved in the online environment. Student emails went unanswered, assignments were vague and confusing, and a constant feeling of being neglected and left to figure things out alone were a nagging frustration. When this happened and it was possible, the course was dropped. When the course was a requirement for graduation, it was completed with personal anger and frustration at the lack of instructor support and involvement.

On the other hand, having a great experience at the graduate level and earning a master's degree completely online at the University of Alaska helped reevaluate and realize there are many positive aspects of taking courses online. There were many courses that were thoroughly enjoyed, and much learning took place. When these experiences were considered, it was because the instructor did more than teach the course as an outsider, the instructor was a part of the course, a part of the curriculum, and the online class environment. These instructors wanted to know the students more personally. There was instructor interest in student lives outside of class and they wanted to hear about lived experiences. As one who experienced both positive instructor involvement as well as no instructor involvement, it became a driving force to be an instructor motivated to keep students engaged, interested, and cared for.

As an instructor and educator for 27 years at both the high school and college level, personal experience has only increased personal motivation to see students succeed and rediscover a love for learning. Most students want to learn, but oftentimes the flame for learning is extinguished by teachers who lack compassion for their students and lack passion for the

subject area they are teaching. Therefore, discovering what helps students stay interested in their classes and keep them enrolled to course completion has long been a personal focus in course development and instruction.

Researcher Role

In a phenomenological study, Moustakas (1994) claims that the "self of the researcher is present throughout the process and, while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge" (p. 17). The researcher is within the study as opposed to being outside the study as in a quantitative study (Creswell, 2013) and is receptive to each statement of the interviewee's experience, encouraging a "rhythmic flow between the research participant and researcher" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 123).

Keeping the flow moving between the participant and researcher was often a struggle during the interview process because of the difficulty of staying quiet and refraining from sharing stories of past experiences and allowing the interviewee full opportunity to share their own lived experiences in developmental asynchronous online courses. It was important to keep silent about being disgruntled as a student in past online courses and listen carefully to those being interviewed and listen from the perspective of no existing prior judgments (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). This allowed each participant the opportunity to stay focused and share past perceptions and experiences which then provided the meaning behind the lived experiences.

The role of the researcher then, was to implement student responses and use them to create the textual, structural, and textural-structural narratives without any subjectivity (Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015).

Data Collection

The data collection began with 42 interested participants. Emails were sent to each student, providing the link to the demographic questionnaire. Of the 42 students, 36 filled out the questionnaire and provided their names and email addresses for further correspondence.

Demographic Information

Of the 36 participants who filled out the questionnaire, 30 agreed to be interviewed. Those inteviewed chose to be a part of this study in order to help others gain insights into their lived experiences while being enrolled in asynchronous online courses. The demographic questionnaire and one-to-one interviews occurred over a 12-week period. Each student involved in the study had completed at least three online asynchronous courses, including a minimum of one developmental online asynchronous course, with 57% having taken more than eight courses. The participants included five men and twenty-five women, all of whom were 23 years old and older. An equal mix of married and single students were involved with 53% not having any children in the home. Of those students living in Alaska, 80% lived on the Alaska road system in towns with populations larger than 5,000 and 20% lived off the Alaska road system in communities with a population between 1,000 and 5,000.

In Table 1, the demographic characteristics of the interviewed students are shown.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 30)

Character	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Female	25	83%
Male	5	17%

Table 1 (Continued)

Age in Years		
18-22	0	0%
23-30	12	40%
31-40	9	30%
41-50	6	20%
51 and older	3	10%
Number of Online Classes Taken		
3-5	6	20%
6-8	8	27%
9-11	12	40%
11 or more	4	13%
Race		
White	20	67%
Asian or Asian American	2	7%
Hispanic or Latino	3	10%
African American	1	3%
American Indian or Alaska Native	3	10%
Chose Not to Answer	1	3%
Relationship Status		
Single	15	50%
Married	15	50%
Population of Town Where You Live in Alaska		
1-1000	0	0%
1001-5000	5	17%
5001-10,000	5	17%
More than 10,000	15	50%
Not Living in Alaska	4	13%
Prefer Not to Answer	1	3%

Table 1 (Continued)

Do You Live on the Alaska Road System		
Yes	20	80%
No	5	20%
Children Under the Age of 18 Who Live in Your Home		
None	16	53%
1	4	13%
2	6	20%
3	3	10%
4 or more	1	3%
Total Hours Studying Online Each Week		
0-3	2	7%
4-6	4	13%
7-9	3	10%
10-12	7	23%
13-15	2	7%
16-18	7	23%
More than 18	5	17%

One-to-One Interviews

Once the demographic data was collected, emails were sent to these 36 students, of which 30 followed through and participated in the one-to-one interview lasting between 20 and 30 minutes. During these open-ended conversational interviews, the prewritten questions (See Appendix E) were used to guide the discussion with many unscripted follow-up questions to provide a more in-depth understanding of student experiences. All 30 participants agreed to have their voice audio-recorded and transcribed. None of the participants agreed to have their interview video recorded.

All 30 interviews were personally transcribed in order to fully listen to, internalize, and deeply consider what was said by students. This also provided the opportunity to further journal insights, thoughts, and feelings as transcription was taking place. Patton (2002) described this time of reflection as an opportunity to "guarantee that the data obtained will be useful, reliable, and authentic (p. 384).

Research Methodology's Application to the Data Analysis

Phenomenology was chosen as the methodology for this research because phenomenology focuses on interviewing participants to learn of their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). Because this study's research question focused on student-defined teacher care strategies and their implementation in the asynchronous online environment, discovering the lived experiences in this environment of each student interviewed was imperative to discovering what might be done to improve student persistence.

Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of Analysis

Data analysis was done using Moustakas' modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2013). The Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method was chosen because of its simplistic approach to data analysis and clear description of the steps (Creswell, 2013). This method made it easy to focus on what students said in the interviews and allowed one to really listen to the significant statements that were shared.

In analyzing the data collected from the one-to-one interviews, the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method offers a six-step process. Each of these steps leads to a better and focused analysis.

Step One:

This first step allowed the chance to personally reflect on past experiences as a student who took online courses years ago. This was done, not as an attempt to bracket and focus solely on the participants who later would be interviewed, but to allow for reflexivity, which is the

opportunity to look back on the past as a student and journal on successes and challenges that were remembered in the asynchronous online environment (Sloan & Bowe, 2014).

Answering the interview questions which would later be asked to students, gave the opportunity to use past online course experiences as an aid in the interpretation of the data from the one-to-one interviews for this study. It was an opportunity to reflect on the emotions which surfaced when personally answering the same interview questions presented to students.

It was imperative that all involved had experienced the same phenomenon so that both the researcher and participant connected with one another. This allowed each participant, including the researcher, to describe from each of their perspectives the event being studied (Moustakas, 1994). The aim of the analysis was to build a detailed description of the human behavior and experiences as they occurred with the participants. Therefore, comparable personal human experiences were integrated to better construct the description (van Manen, 1990).

Step Two:

The second step was to fully describe each of the participant's personal lived experience of the phenomenon by developing a list of significant statements. As participants spoke about their experience, words and phrases that led to a fuller understanding of the phenomenon were highlighted and those words and phrases that were repetitive, vague, and overlapping were removed (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015). Each of the relevant phrases or words were treated as being of equal value. This equalization, called horizontalization, was used to ensure each word and phrase were given equal attention. The information that was retained became the invariant constituents or "meaning units" of the transcript and are foundational to the research (Moustakas, 1994). This was done following

Nackoney's (2012) work, which suggested removing the questions from the participant transcripts and focusing on the running narrative rather than the questions.

Step Three:

Once the invariant constituents (significant statements) were constructed, they were gathered into themes that represented the essence of each participant's lived experience as a student in a developmental asynchronous online course. In order to discover the central themes of these experiences, imaginative variation was employed in order to view each participant's experience through many different lenses. Moustakas (1994) explains that "the task of Imaginative Variation is to seek possible meanings through the utilization of imagination, varying the frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, different positions, roles, or functions" (p. 97). Imaginative variation allowed the use of past roles as a student in online coursework as well as past and present experiences instructing developmental asynchronous online courses to help develop textural descriptions for each participant.

Step Four:

The textural descriptions of each student's experience were created from the themes gathered. This textural description is the "what" of the student's experience (Creswell, 2013). It is the description, or what happened during the experience, using examples from the transcripts as support. This textural description from each student interviewed was then used to develop a structural description of the experience.

Step Five:

Using the textural description and imaginative variation, a structural description was constructed for each student in the study (Moustakas, 1994; Ruderstam & Newton, 2014). This

structural description is the "how" of the participant's experience. "It is the underlying dynamics of the experience, the themes and qualities that account for 'how' feelings and thoughts connected with the phenomenon are aroused" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 135). It is a reflection on the setting and context of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

Step Six:

Once the textural and structural descriptions were written for each student, a composite description was written by creating a narrative from both the textural and structural descriptions and providing a blended description capturing the essences of the experience. This was the step that "integrated all individual textural-structural descriptions into a universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122). It was the opportunity to integrate all the textural-structural descriptions into three composite themes. These themes are as follows:

In order to have a positive online course experience, students believe instructors must consider:

1. improving communication skills between the instructor and individual students
2. being personable with individual students
3. creating a course design that is simple and easy to follow

Description of the Composite Themes

The composite themes described below were extrapolated from the analysis of the 30 student interviews. When analysis began, the textural-structural descriptions were divided into seven composite themes. These composite themes were: communication, being personal, course design, caring about students, desire for student success, being helpful, and a reasonable response time. As each of these themes were further scrutinized, it became obvious that some could be categorized under other themes. Therefore, caring about students, being helpful, and desire for student success were included under being personable with individual students. Also,

the theme of having a reasonable response time was placed under the theme of communication since response time is part of being communicative with students. Included are student verbatim responses and stories from the interviews to help support each of the themes developed during the data collection process.

Theme 1: Improving Communication Skills

In order for students to have a positive asynchronous online course experience, they believe instructors must consider improving communication skills between themselves and the student.

Of the 30 students interviewed, all mentioned that good communication between the instructor and the student was one of the main reasons they succeeded in their asynchronous online developmental courses. This communication between the instructor and student took place through emails and texts. Emails were the most common method of communication and served as a "lifeline" for students. Brittany said;

> I think communication was the key to my success. I took a class and failed it because my instructor never emailed me answers to my questions. I took the course again from a different instructor and I passed because the instructor was available.

Alee put so much emphasis on communication that she admitted she would have failed the course if her instructor was not there to answer her email and texted questions. Raegan tied the good communication of her instructor to her success in the class. She said her instructor's communication made her feel that he was interested in her success as a student.

Communication between the instructor and student was important to the students interviewed, but even more so was how quickly the communication happened. Mia was able to think back on her success in her first online developmental course and said;

> My first math class changed my world. I especially liked being able to text questions and even got answers back right away and the easy communication was the best. Sometimes you send an email and have to wait 5 days for a response, not so in this class.

Others commented on the need to have questions answered quickly so they could get their assignments done correctly and turned in on time. Mia shared her experience with slow communication;

> Instructors have to get back with you before the assignment is due. Just because an instructor is busy is no excuse not to help. Their busyness is not my problem, I paid for the course, which means I paid for the instructor's attention. If the deadline is already past and she hasn't gotten back to me, I get behind.

Consistent communication was praised by students because it made them feel they had a better opportunity for success. In fact, Jill's continual plan is to search for classes with instructors who have the reputation of good communication. She said, "When class registration opens, I look for online profs who have a reputation of being organized and communicate well with students. I have found that the more the prof communicates with the students, the better off you are as a student….at least for me."

Troy also believes in the importance of communication and its connection to student success when he said, "Math….it was all new to me, then going through the textbook online and getting fast responses from the teacher in layman's terms made it a successful experience. I felt I was actually learning."

On the other hand, many students struggled, failed, or quit classes when the communication from the instructor was poor or non-existent. Bobby's frustration centered around instructors failing to keep office hours. He said, "The instructor wasn't as available or

helpful as I would have liked. It was hard to get a hold of him, he had online office hours, but he wouldn't be there when he said he would be." Emily's struggle centered around not being able to get questions answered prior to turning in assignments and not getting any feedback on graded work;

> It was like we had to just go to Blackboard and figure out what you needed to do and it's like we had to teach ourselves and I don't think that's fair. The instructor also just tells you what you did wrong without giving any direction about how to fix things. I feel like the bad thing is that if students come to you for help, you need to respond in a timely manner, and I get frustrated when it doesn't happen. Like if I sent a note about a paper about how exactly she wanted it written, what format, or I need help with the thesis, and it wasn't replied to until after it had to be turned in by like two days drove me crazy.

A student's frustration can cause them to really struggle in a class, but sometimes this frustration becomes so intense that students fail the course because they give up. Tristan gave up on a class because her questions weren't being answered;

> I lost my motivation. Like when an assignment came up and I had a lot of questions. I was asking questions well before the due date, I try to stay ahead of things, and he wouldn't respond. Then I would send a follow-up email, and then another and another. It just made me feel like he didn't care. And I'm like, I'm not going to move forward with this class, so forget it.

Brittany's experience was similar to Tristan's. She remembered one particular developmental course that she quit;

> One sticks out, and that was horrible for me. The instructor had us buy the book, then was like, 'Here you go' and didn't really teach us anything. I had never had any

> experience like that….being told to teach yourself and figure it out. And I didn't do well, in fact about midway through I just gave up. I would email her a lot and tell her I was stuck on something, and I would email her and she would either not get back to me within a matter of days or just quit responding to me after a while. And so I kind of felt like she wasn't there to instruct me. It was like, 'Do these and read the book'. So, I just quit. I was getting low scores on everything I turned in. I would ask for help and she wouldn't respond, or she would respond with one answer on one of my questions, but that wouldn't get me very far. I kept trying, but half way through, I just quit.

The importance of communication as a theme to student success can be summed up by both Jovee and Bobby. Jovee's final comment was;

> I remember my first developmental instructor said to ask as many questions as we wanted and email him anytime. And I'm like, alright, someone is here to guide us through. He is there to make sure we succeed. And he certainly was, it was a great class. I think especially for students like me who have a hard time. So, to have an instructor who is there for you is so key.

And Bobby ended his interview with;

> Lack of communication across the board makes a class impossible to feel good about. The noncommunicative teacher seems to close their eyes to the struggles with students in the online class. It's like 'figure it out'. I think there is a delicate balance between letting students dig and helping students out by communicating with them.

Communication was expressed by students to be one of the major reasons for their success in a class. This communication included not only hearing back from the instructor when questions were submitted by email or text, but also how quickly the instructor answered student

questions. Instructor communication not only helped students finish the course successfully, but made students feel their success was important. As students told about their experiences in developmental online courses, their frustrations came to the surface through their tone of voice. When students had a good experience with communication, they were quick to comment they felt important enough that the instructor took the time to help them through difficulties by being there to answer questions.

Theme 2: Being Personable

Having an instructor who communicates regularly is a priority for students because this communication often shows the student that the instructor cares about their success and wants to connect with them by being personable. An instructor who is personable was a second theme and was mentioned by 22 students who felt that it kept them engaged and wanting to complete their asynchronous online courses. Thorne et al., (2005) described being personable as getting to know others' unique characteristics and needs with an emphasis on connecting with them. When an instructor gets to know the unique characteristics of students, a connection happens that improves the student-instructor relationship.

Although it can be difficult to do, from a student's perspective, connecting with students and letting them know their success is important can keep a student engaged and enrolled in an asynchronous online course. Brittany believes this as she talked about one of her classes;

> I think the more curriculum and the more tools made available to us on Blackboard for me to utilize, makes me feel like, "Ok, this person kind of cares about me. I can do this". This person wants me to learn the material. It's kind of an unspoken cultural thing, where it's kind of like, you know, here's the book, figure it out, and then, someone else is like, here's all these resources you can go to and the office hours are here, and I will try

> to respond within 24 hours. That just shows the instructor…you know, I just feel more comfortable coming to them with any issues I might have. I think that's how you build it, I know there's always going to be that barrier of the computer screen, but I guess you make it evident that you want to connect and care about your students and how they do and all that.

Brenda's experience echoed Brittany's attitude toward an instructor who was personable when she commented that her developmental math instructor had the type of personality that made her struggles in math less intimidating. Her comments were;

> I would have to say that my math class last semester was the best as far as instructors because she acted and talked on the video like she was across the table from us. Very personable….just makes it feel that we were there in the classroom together. She made me want to learn. I also appreciated that she would often say, "This is hard stuff" even though I knew she didn't think it's hard. Acknowledging that things are hard makes us feel she was in the trenches with us.

Although the course is online, students know if their instructor is personable. Students can describe an instructor's attitude and sense of care for them through the class lecture videos as well as the emails and texts they send. Sue felt her instructor cared by saying;

> I could hear it in his voice and in the emails sent out. He enjoyed teaching us. You can always tell when you get into a class whether or not the instructor enjoys what they are doing and wants me to succeed because they will have all kinds of resources or they will lecture the material themselves instead of using the book's video lectures. Bad instructors don't lecture themselves or have any other supplemental materials. That's how you tell if a professor enjoys what he is doing and if they care about us.

Another important trait showing an instructor is personable is having empathy for students. Julee said it well when she talked about what she would do if she were an instructor. She said, "I would put myself in the students' shoes and would think about what I wanted them to see in my personality". Jovee, who had taken several online courses, described what she considered an empathetic instructor, especially with older adults when she said;

> You have to understand that life happens. You could have a student who is a full-time mom with 6 kids at home and becoming a teacher is her dream and she must take the course online when they have a full life outside of being a student with 6 others vying for their time. The instructor has to know and understand this. As an instructor, you must be able to ask what is happening in their lives right now. I think many instructors look at online students as an 18 year-old kid with no backbone, having never been to school. The instructor wants to keep college discipline, but most of the students are older and coming back to school, so you have to have a good idea who your students are and where they're coming from because then you can either lighten their load or say that excuse is not gonna work with me. Wherever they are, it's important to work with your students. That is what makes me want to be in the class.

Jeanne brought up an interesting perspective when she mentioned that an instructor who was personable and got to know who she was as a person kept her from feeling stupid when she didn't understand a concept in class and had to ask the same question a couple of times before she understood what to do. Troy discussed this as well and said, "When you feel that an instructor connects with you, you don't feel that you are bugging them…even after 50 emails about the same thing.

It was made obvious by several students, that one of the most effective ways an instructor can make themselves personable to students is by using videos. Those who shared the importance of videos communicated how their use helped better the relationship with their instructor. Elyssa talked about the use of videos at the beginning of the course when she said, "When I get a video introducing the class and themselves, it helps me realize that this is an actual human being who wants me to pass the course and isn't doing it for just the money."

Using videos throughout the semester is common for many instructors, but students were specific as to the frequency they would like these videos. Charis was impressed with one instructor who would send out a weekly video explaining the current week's work in more detail and said, "My other instructors didn't send out videos to us, but this one did and I felt that I got to know him. He reached out to us and helped us to succeed in the class." Raegan also commented about a weekly video by saying;

> I learned who he was and could relate to him since I heard from him every week. And he always included funny stories and had trivia in them for us to answer by email. This really helped me get to know him and feel that he was there for my success.

Instructor videos helped with the connection between the students and instructors, but students were specific about which videos were the most personable. Andi was the first to bring up the fact that she loved the videos created by the instructor, but thought the YouTube videos made by total strangers were a waste of her time and provided no connection between her and the instructor. Beatrix agreed when she said, "Watching other people lecture just didn't work for me. Having the teacher lecture seemed more personable." Daisy finished with, "The instructor-made videos were specific to what was happening in the course rather than searching for someone on YouTube to teach a topic that really didn't mesh very well with what was being

taught in the course." Finally, Beatrix brought up a class where she would email or text a question to her instructor and the instructor would make a personal video for her;

> I like being able to text my instructor with a question and he would make a personal video just for me....he even called me by name so I knew it was just for me. It made it seem that the class wasn't virtual because he was there for me.

Having an instructor attempt to know students and empathize with their struggles was a very important piece in keeping students engaged and satisfied with their asynchronous online courses. Jill closed out her interview with the following reflection;

> If you don't have any relationship, you are more likely to fail. We have these kids who don't have any confidence and they go into college that way. We have favorite college instructors who push you and come along side you and you will remember them in the future. It's important to have a connection....especially adults going into these developmental classes. We aren't failures. We are broken and forgotten and we need a prof who is an encouragement to us to keep pushing and believing in us. It's how they reach us. I feel like going back to college as an adult, I am intimidated and afraid and I need a prof who helps me through my struggles.

This ability to get to know students' unique characteristics and try to connect with them did not go unobserved by the students interviewed and may have been a reason why students made the decision to continue with the course.

Theme 3: Creating a Course Design that is Simple and Easy to Follow

Although course design does not appear to be a method of building relationships between the instructor and the student, it can be a way the instructor communicates course expectations and requirements to students thus encouraging a connection with students. Since, according to

interviews, students appreciate a simple and easy to follow course design, they also appreciate the instructor who makes this a priority. Of the 30 students interviewed, 16 suggested that instructors who made their courses easy to understand and simple to follow kept them engaged which encouraged a more successful experience. Jovee, a seasoned online student, expressed it well when she focused on the beginning of the semester;

> I love it when teachers engage with students before classes even start. I really need a good structure in the class. This sets the tone of the class by having folders and a clear plan for each week with things to do. It needs to be such an organized structure that when I open a folder, everything for the week is there….assignments, explanations, videos, and what is expected of me. These are really important especially that first week. I am confused, nervous, don't want to miss assignments, and if it is posted haphazardly, it starts you off on the wrong foot as a student. You have no idea what is expected the first week of classes and it can send you into a frenzy of emailing the instructor back and forth. It's basically, how organized your instructor is. What is the format? Is it all readable? It's really important to set the tone at the start for the rest of the semester.

Troy also thought organization, especially at the beginning of the semester, was very important when he mentioned his biggest hurdle was learning a new instructor's course plan. He said;

> It's challenging for the student to figure things out. Lots of folks log in and think it's going to be a cake walk and will be able to just cruise through the course because they think the course layout will be obvious, but when they get into the course, they find it's not.

Even though it makes sense to have a well-structured and organized class that students can follow, this does not always happen, and causes frustration and stress for the student. Bethany mentioned that in several of her classes, she struggled with the lack of consistency between the syllabus lesson plan and the plan that appeared on the Blackboard learning system. Sue mentioned the same issue when she said;

> Blackboard and the syllabus were disorganized in my course. The syllabus had one due date, then we would get an email that the due date was changed, but the announcement page never reflected that change. Having a clear due date is a must for me to know what the expectations are.

In addition to lack of organization, a complicated course structure caused students to misunderstand and miss lessons because there was so much to work through. Jovee was frustrated with what she called, "millions of file folders". She said;

> Like you click on week one and it says, "things to do" and then it opens up to "things to read", "things to watch"…and it's like way too many file folders and it's not simple to figure out and I think what drove me nuts is there were way too many things going on at once….lots of articles to read, sound files that were optional, then the required stuff. It was way too overwhelming and I was always worried that I missed something along the way.

Kirsten was more concerned with all the work being so complicated when she explained one class she took;

> This one class had a lot of disorganization and there was a lot of work. For example, there was a due date every week at midnight on Sunday, then there was a two-day grace period, then there were "badges" to be turned in for extra credit and then an optional final

exam. It was like an intro class and felt immature, yet complicated. I would have just preferred a due date and no grace period. It reminded me of high school classes…just complicated. I was so lost and stressed trying to figure things out.

When a class was organized and expectations clear, students felt empowered to work in the class and succeed. Kirsten stated, "I most enjoyed classes that were really organized in a simple way, it made me feel less stress." Jeanne agreed by saying, "A well-organized lesson plan each week and knowing the due dates was the number one thing that helped me". Elyssa followed with, "My best class was very simple in how it was planned. I felt that I could sit down and just do the homework on my own with no struggles." When Julee was asked to explain why she did so well in her favorite class, she stated;

> The class was pretty straight-forward and I was able to easily follow and understand things clearly. I was just really impressed with how easy it was to follow. It kept me from feeling the stress I had felt in other classes.

To design a course that is simple to follow and organized with clear expectations takes a lot of the instructor's time, but students interviewed felt instructors who did not do this were not being helpful to their students. As Jill said, "If an instructor can't organize their online course and be ready for instruction, then they can't expect their students to do their best work."

Because of family, work, and other commitments, students oftentimes do not have the option but to take their courses in the asynchronous online environment. Those taking developmental courses online have the added struggle of being new to this method of instruction and can easily become frustrated when their instructors fail to communicate regularly, do not seem to be interested in them personally, and create courses that are complicated and confusing

to students who are not familiar with the online environment. This frustration can be so intense for some students, that they often give up on the class or withdraw.

On the other hand, when instructors are actively involved in their students' lives by maintaining communication, sincerely caring about their students, and making sure the course design is easy to understand and user friendly, students have the tendency to be more satisfied with the course and likely to finish the course.

Trustworthiness

Seeking confidence in the study, four criteria, elaborated by Guba (1981) and Guba and Lincoln (1982) were used. These four criteria; credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability helped to establish trustworthiness.

Credibility

Credibility is a method to establish reasonable and believable findings as well as correctly interpreting the data from the participant interviews (Anney, 2014; Guba & Lincoln, 1982). To establish credibility in this study, member checking was used as an opportunity to ask for participant feedback of those interviewed in order to avoid misinterpretation or bias (Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Merriam, 2009).

This research must represent the participants' views and not be biased by the researcher's personal views (Creswell, 2013). Each student was sent their interview transcript and asked to make any changes they felt were not accurate. Changes were made based on student responses. Students were also sent parts of chapter 4 that included their quotes from their transcript as well as interpretations of their individual transcripts and were encouraged to affirm or question any interpretations they felt were not accurate.

Dependability

Dependability seeks to assure that the findings can be duplicated by others. Although human behavior makes replication questionable, it can be best assured using an audit trail because it creates documented history for future researchers (Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Merriam, 2009).

The audit trail in this study consisted of keeping a journal of reflections, ideas, coding methods, interview transcripts, and questionnaire results. Journaling took place as initial emails were sent out, responses were returned, and interview appointments were made. Journaling was also kept discussing the difficulty of planning interviews for 30 students and the response rates of students. As interviews began, journaling included personal reflections after each interview and any research bias and frustration with fellow instructors who seemed to lack the skills necessary to teach online courses. Once interviews were complete, journaling focused on the analyzing of the data collected including the creation of themes, limits of themes, and the trial and error of coding the data.

Transferability

Being able to generalize the data and making it transferable to alternate settings and populations is known as transferability (Guba, 1981; O'Leary, 2014). By writing a detailed journal of the data collection process and analysis not only added dependability to the research, but also provided the opportunity for transferability. This audit trail provided an opportunity for future researchers to discover if their own settings and populations are similar enough to warrant the use of these research procedures. It places the burden of applicability to future research on the researcher as they determine the connectedness between this, and future projects (Merriam, 2009).

Along with the audit trail, purposive sampling was used to increase transferability. Choosing a sample relevant to the research being done, provided students who had experience in the asynchronous online developmental environment, giving more in-depth data specific to the research question.

Confirmability

Creating an audit trail, made it possible to fully examine a running account of the data collection and analysis recorded in the research journal, thus, confirming the objectivity of the analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Maxwell, 2013; Schwandt, 2015). By using a running journal, conclusions were based on what was recorded in interviews rather than influenced by emotions, prejudices, or subjectivities (O'Leary, 2014), thus reducing bias.

Conclusion

This chapter focused on the procedures used to collect and analyze the data from an online questionnaire and recorded interviews. Also included were the methods of participant selection and the interview process. Moustakas' (1994) Modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of Analysis was described as well as the purpose for using this method in phenomenological research such as this. Representative transcripts of student interviews were included in order to support the themes discovered, concluding with a discussion on trustworthiness in the data collection and analysis of the interviews.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate and better understand the student perspective of the relationship between the student and instructor in developmental asynchronous online courses and determine whether this relationship might minimize the attrition rates of students at University of Alaska campuses.

To obtain the student perspective and lived experiences in asynchronous online developmental courses, a qualitative method using a phenomenological design was used. This method collected data from the student experience using interviews to determine why they did what they did (Creswell, 2013, 2014; van Manen, Higgins, & Riet, 2016). It was most effective for this study because its focus was on making discoveries and gaining a better understanding of students' experiences as it examined the "voice of the participants" (Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2013, p. 44).

The phenomenological study provided data that was both rich and meaningful, but with this form of data collection comes the struggle of limitations within the study. Along with a lack of representativeness of the sample, honesty from the participants, and lack of research experience on the part of the researcher, personal bias was a major concern. Having been an online instructor as well as an online student over the years, there were many positive and negative emotions that were brought to the surface as students shared their stories. This made it difficult to keep a neutral perspective when interpreting the data. Therefore, journaling was used extensively as well as membership checking to keep bias to a minimum.

Chapter 4 presented the findings of student interviews. These findings were based on the stories collected from students who had both positive and negative experiences in their online courses. Once these stories were collected and analyzed, three major themes were revealed.

Chapter 5 focuses on a summary and discussion of the findings and their implications for university leaders, instructors, and online course developers. The chapter closes with the limitations, implications of the study, and the additional options for future research.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore strategies to reduce the attrition rates of online developmental asynchronous classes at the University of Alaska. This was done by exploring the lived experiences of students through a phenomenological methodology. A phenomenological approach was used in order to gain, from a student perspective, the attitudes and perceptions of those who had succeeded or struggled in the online environment in order to gain a comprehensive description of student experiences (van Manen, 1990). Overall, students expressed that in order to have a positive online experience in their developmental courses, instructors must provide good communication, be personable with students, and provide a course design that is simple and easy to follow. Conversely, the absence of these three instructor characteristics frustrate many students to the point of withdrawing or quitting the course.

Demographic questionnaires and individual interviews were used to collect data from 30 participants who had taken at least one developmental asynchronous online course at the University of Alaska. The results were used to answer the question, What implemented teacher care strategies, defined by students, might improve student self-determination and minimize attrition in developmental asynchronous online courses at University of Alaska campuses?

Although much research has been done on the success and failure of online courses, little has been found that addresses developmental asynchronous online courses from a student perspective. Students enrolled in developmental courses not only struggle with the online environment as many traditional students do, but added to this is the lack of confidence, low academic skill (Castillo, 2013), low self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), and for many, there is a struggle with both written and verbal language skills (Crisp & Delgado, 2014).

Theme One: Communication

While listening to students' online experiences, most mentioned that communication was a key to their success and desire to continue the course. These students consistently attributed their success in a course to helpful and timely responses from the course instructor.

In the asynchronous online environment, communication usually takes place using email or text messaging. Although a typical instructor response can appear sterile and impersonal, by quickly responding to student questions with a thorough answer, it is possible for an instructor to exhibit care and concern for student success. Students depend on timely responses to their questions about the course and assignments so they can better understand course requirements as well as correctly complete their work. When instructors fail to respond to student questions quickly and thoroughly, students may feel neglected and apathetic about the course.

Students interviewed who were frustrated to the point of dropping or quitting a course attributed their struggles to a lack of quality and timely communication between the student and instructor. Many students became exasperated because questions over assignments went unanswered and therefore were unsure about the requirements prior to the due date. Students also became aggravated when an instructor would respond to a question with a short trite comment that did not fully answer the question, giving students the feeling of an uncaring

instructor who was bothered by student questions. These findings support past research recognizing student frustration because of slow feedback, difficulty contacting the instructor, and limited communication in online courses (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012). On the other hand, students who succeeded and enjoyed their courses attributed much of their success to good communication and social presence with the instructor. These findings confirm past studies that found a student's connectedness with the instructor encouraged student persistence in a course (Hart, 2012; Rodriguez, 2015; Wise, Chang, Duffy, & del Valle, 2004). Students interviewed considered good communication to include instructor responses to emails and text messaging questions in a timely manner that fully answered their questions about an assignment or course requirement. Student persistence then, may be related to a student's satisfaction with communication with the instructor in the asynchronous online environment (Hart, 2012).

Theme Two: Personable

Along with communication, over 70 percent of those interviewed also believed an instructor who was personable and connected with students kept them engaged and enrolled in the course. This personable characteristic in student-instructor communication supports the research from previous studies that found student satisfaction correlating to a good relationship between the student and instructor (Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012).

It was discovered through interviews that an instructor who is personable connects with students, making them feel their success in the course is important. Brittany's response to this type of instructor was "OK, this person cares about me. I can do this". This personable spirit from the instructor also made the course less intimidating and threatening to the students

interviewed. Students felt they could comfortably ask questions they felt may be construed as "stupid" and believed they would be answered with a patient, helpful attitude by the instructor.

A non-threatening personable environment created by the instructor also made it safe for students to share life struggles. Many students commented they appreciated instructors who understood that life happens and were willing to work with student emergencies when they occurred. Students believed this caring attitude is what helped them continue with the course since it would have been impossible to do so otherwise. The importance of a personable instructor appeared to be of great importance to the success of students and was summed up in Jill's comment that "…we need a prof who is an encouragement to keep pushing and believing in us. It's how they reach us…and I need a prof who helps me through my struggles".

Theme Three: Simple and Easy to Follow Course Design

A final theme discovered through the interviews of the lived experiences of students was instructors must create a course whose design is simple and easy to follow. Whether or not a course is easy to navigate and simple to understand either helps or hinders a student's success in the course. This confirms previous research indicating that if the web-based instructions are confusing to students, the work complicated, and the instructor absent, students will often drop the course (Croxton, 2014; Gaytan, 2015; Hart, 2012; Lee & Choi 2010; Park, 2007). Hartnett (2015) also suggests that when the course environment, through the curriculum, attempts to meet the basic needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness of the student, students will better engage in the learning process within the online environment, possibly encouraging students to persist in the course. This is especially evident with students in developmental courses (Travers, 2016) as these students sometimes struggle with an overloaded life schedule and don't have the time to decipher a complicated and confusing curriculum.

Over half of the students interviewed indicated that a simple and easy to follow course design made a significant impact on their frustration level and ability to complete the course. A comment that was repeated by many was the ability to see each week's work in one folder and only needing to work within that folder rather than being led through multiple links and files. This ease in finding material for the week made students feel secure knowing they had completed all the week's lessons and didn't forget anything. The ease in navigating the course's links also saved students valuable time.

On the other hand, students who were enrolled in courses where there were, as Jovee said, "millions of file folders with 'things to do', 'things to watch', and 'things to read'" were highly frustrated and stressed because of the constant worry that something would be missed.

Students believed, as research suggests, that instructors must evaluate, structure, and design the format for ease of use in the online environment (Tobin, 2014). This makes the curriculum accessible by providing a clear and organized course, giving students uncomplicated direction to encourage student learning (Anderson et al., 2001; Hixon, Buckenmeyer, & Barczyk, 2015; Samuel, 2015).

Discussion of the Findings

The findings in this phenomenological study adds to current knowledge on student persistence and attrition in the online environment by specifically addressing students enrolled in developmental asynchronous online courses within the University of Alaska System. Although research was done specifically within the university, the findings presented may help other universities and faculty outside the University of Alaska gain a better understanding of student attrition within the domain of developmental asynchronous online courses. Themes found within the area of student internal factors in previous research of traditional online learners (Costley &

Lange, 2016; Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2014; Gaytan, 2015; Hixon, Buckenmeyer, & Barczyk, 2015; Plantes & Asselin, 2014; Rodriguez, 2015; Samuel, 2015) were similar to those found in this study of developmental asynchronous online students. As was discussed in the literature review, much research addressing attrition rates in online courses has been done and solutions to the problem have been suggested, yet attrition remains high despite implementing suggested solutions to the problem. In past research, three themes emerged which led to attrition in online courses. These three themes focused on environmental factors, student factors, and curriculum.

Environmental Factors

Both Castillo (2013) and McMahon (2013) found many students dropped their online courses based on environmental factors such as time constraints, family responsibilities, life circumstances, and work commitments. Earlier research also discovered family and job responsibilities took precedence over academics when there was a conflict between the student's online course and other responsibilities, prompting a student to drop the course (Cochran, Campbell, Baker, & Leeds, 2013; Helms, 2014). In this study, when students were asked about their biggest struggle taking online courses and what brought them to the point of dropping a course, environmental factors such as outside commitments to family and community were not mentioned by any interviewee as a reason for frustration, stress, or quitting a course. Students struggles were focused primarily on the course itself. This leads one to believe that students interviewed in this study were affected more by internal student factors and course struggles rather than external situations.

Student Factors

Student factors such as motivation, and self-determination was another theme that previous research discovered which leads to student success or failure in the online environment

(Brown et al., 2015; Demetriou &Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Lee et al., 2013). It is especially interesting to note that the study done by Demetriou and Schmitz-Sciborski (2011) suggested that these internal student factors shape how a student navigates through the struggles they face and directly relates to persistence in the online environment.

These student factors can affect how a student will react to struggles in the online setting. For example, if the course is poorly designed, the instructor fails to communicate with students and appears cold and distant, some students will persevere, while others will become frustrated and drop the course. This was found to be true in this study. When interviewing thirty students who had taken developmental asynchronous online courses, each had stories of difficult experiences they had encountered. Some students dealt with these struggles and frustrations and responded to them like Jovee, who said, "I knew I had to stick to my plan and just push through. But I know a lot of my classmates did drop classes. They just couldn't handle it. I just kept my nose to the grindstone and tried to persevere and ignore the frustrations along the way". But most handled their dissatisfaction with contempt or took a more severe course of action as Emily did, "I just quit. I was getting low scores on everything I turned in. I would ask for help and she wouldn't respond or she would respond with an answer to one of my questions, but that wouldn't get me very far. I kept trying, but then, I just quit."

Motivation. With the majority of interviewed students being frustrated, giving up, or quitting a class when difficulties emerged, it would appear that students taking developmental asynchronous online courses lack the motivation to, as Jovee said, "…just push through". This makes sense based on research done by Flynn (2016) who discovered when unprepared developmental students choose to take courses online they are often setting themselves up for failure.

Self-determination. In addition to motivation, another student factor often leading students to discouragement or the dropping of a course is lack of self-determination. Self-determination includes a student's pursuit to satisfy three psychological needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Deci et al., 1991). Students want to have some control of the world around them, have relationships with others, and have control over one's own life course. How these psychological needs affect the classroom experience for students was noted in the study by Hartnett (2015) who discovered that students became frustrated with lack of instructor input, infrequent performance feedback, and unclear expectations resulting in feelings of anxiety and helplessness, leading to lower competency, relatedness, and autonomy levels and undermining student success in the course. These same struggles were apparent in the current study as students voiced their online course experiences. Jill summed up most student's feelings when she said;

> We aren't failures. We are broken and forgotten, and we need a prof who is an encouragement to us to keep pushing and believing in us. It's how they reach us in the classroom. I feel like going back to college as an adult, but I am intimidated and afraid and I need a prof who helps me through my struggles.

When students had a course instructor who failed them by not communicating, and lacked a personable spirit, students in this study, like in previous studies felt that their success in the course was undermined, leading them to aggravation and dissatisfaction with the class and often leading them to quitting the course.

Curriculum

A third theme which emerged from past research often leading to attrition in online courses was curriculum. Curriculum includes not only the textbook, but other course materials

and all that occurs in the classroom (Kern, et al., 1998). Croxton (2014) as well as Tobin (2014) discovered that if the curriculum and web-based instructions are confusing, work is complicated, and students feel isolated from the instructor, they will become dissatisfied and often drop the course. Students especially vulnerable are underprepared students enrolled in asynchronous courses (Travers, 2016).

Responses to interview questions in the current study, show that curriculum plays a large part in student satisfaction in developmental asynchronous online courses. Students who were interviewed discussed the clarity of the curriculum, including the syllabus, website, and online tools as determining factors of course satisfaction. Brittany went so far as to admit she believed an instructor's care for her was dependent on the ease of navigating through the curriculum. Students readily shared experiences of discontent with courses where the curriculum was vague and assignment instructions were difficult to follow and complete. The biggest struggle mentioned by students were poor assignment instructions and unclear expectations. Students were frustrated when instructions were ambiguous and seemingly incomplete in their requirements and due dates. Jeanne summed it up by saying, "A well-organized lesson plan with instructions each week and knowing the due dates were the top things that helped me."

In this study, interviews sought to find out from a student perspective, what causes frustration and dissatisfaction among students leading to withdrawal or quitting a developmental asynchronous online course. The findings were found to be similar to those discovered in previous research studies in the areas of student factors and curriculum, whereas the mention of environmental struggles were non-existent in the current study.

Implications of Findings

The purpose of this study was to determine what implemented teacher care strategies, defined by students, might improve student self-determination and minimize attrition in developmental asynchronous online courses at the University of Alaska. Upon sharing a myriad of experiences of challenges and successes in the online environment, students explained what they believed would help future students be successful. As these suggestions were recorded and transcribed, each idea was considered and adjusted through the lens of past research to develop a course of action that could help students with course satisfaction and persistence in the developmental asynchronous online setting at the University of Alaska. Although many of the suggestions introduced by students centered around instructor improvement, some students recognized that both the university and the student played a role in the success of student achievement in developmental asynchronous online courses.

Implications for Students

Although some students can be quick to blame others for online course struggles, it is important for students to introspect and see if any course difficulties can be attributed to their own lack of motivation and academic challenges.

Motivation. All students, regardless of age and coursework difficulty struggle to maintain motivation throughout a course, yet it is a key to student success (Goldman & Brann, 2016; Marshik, et al., 2017). For a student to persevere through a course Andi believes you must be dedicated with both time and commitment and you must want to get through the course regardless of the struggle. Sue agreed with, "I have never dropped a course because they have always been courses I needed for my program and I just expected there would be courses that

will be hard and that means I must be disciplined and persistent to get through them." Emily believes;

> You have to persevere no matter what. It's just that you have to be determined and roll with the punches….if Blackboard shuts down or if you don't like the instructor, you need to keep looking at the goal. Like I said, after lots of classes, you have to think about the end result and find ways to enjoy the courses.

Student motivation appears to be a contributing factor for student success. Although motivation is encouraged or hindered by external obstacles, it is ultimately the responsibility of the student. Most students interviewed based the reason for their motivation on the necessity of the course for their program. It was the internal contributing student factor to course success. Although student motivation is a student responsibility, the instructor plays a part in encouraging this motivation in the course.

The struggle for students is that motivation takes effort. As Emily said, "you have to persevere no matter what." Students who discussed motivation believe that in order to persist, there must be the motivation to deal with the struggles and challenges and push through them to completion. This is a difficult charge for students, yet imperative for student success. Motivation is key to student dedication in completing a course but is also necessary to help students conquer their academic challenges that often discourage them.

Academic challenges. Students enrolled in developmental courses often struggle in their academic skills to succeed in college. Regardless of the reason for their lack of skills, these students are categorized as academically at-risk and require remedial courses (Castillo, 2013). These developmental courses are designed to build the skills necessary to allow students to move

into college level courses, but oftentimes, these students do not have the basic study skills necessary to succeed in even developmental courses.

According to student interviews, many attributed their success in developmental online courses to their motivation to do what was necessary to build their skills and learn how to navigate the course site. Sue had to figure out her writing class that initially appeared to be complicated and confusing. She said, "At the beginning, there wasn't a lot of instruction to go where and there was a lot of searching to figure out how to submit work, but I eventually figured it all out." Other students stressed the need to go above and beyond course requirements, oftentimes spending time online learning more about the skills they were weak in so they could better understand the content they needed to learn. Students who enroll in developmental asynchronous online courses should expect to put forth the time and effort in learning how to navigate the course format as well as do what they can to make sure they understand course material. They must be made aware of the demands of the course and need of motivation to persist to the end. Making students aware should come from both the student's advisor and course instructor.

Implications for Institutions

When students struggle and drop out of any course, it affects the institution financially and reflects negatively on the study program (Angelino et al., 2007). First, it affects the university financially since students are no longer paying for the classes that were dropped (Liu, Gomez, & Yen, 2009). Students, especially those enrolled in developmental asynchronous online courses, are often underprepared, lack confidence, and self-motivation (Travers, 2016). This makes them more susceptible to dropping out of courses and school in general. Dropping out at the start of their education may keep them from ever returning. This lack of continued

financial support from students can greatly impact the financial stability of a university. Conversely, because of the lower cost in educating students online, universities would be prudent to use these courses to manage financial difficulties (Schmidt, Tschida, & Hodge, 2016). Therefore, administrators should do all they can to encourage student persistence.

Secondly, when students drop courses, it can suggest the program offered by the university is of low quality since students are not interested in completing the courses offered (Willging & Johnson, 2009). Because students enrolled in asynchronous online courses are just beginning their college journey, encouraging persistence in these classes will often guarantee persistence and completion of their education. This persistence supports the university financially and builds the reputation of the programs offered.

Because a university's success is determined by continued student enrollment, it is imperative for administration to discover and implement solutions to the attrition problem of students enrolled in developmental asynchronous online courses. Student interviews suggested several pedagogy techniques instructors should implement to increase persistence in developmental asynchronous online course, but oftentimes, without accountability to, and training by the university, these pedagogy methods are not employed in the online environment. A university's responsibility to its instructors then, should include online instructor training, mentoring, and holding instructors accountable to the expectations of online instructional practices.

Instructor training. Frequently, instructors are assigned online courses with no experience or training in the online environment. Because online courses are relatively new, many instructors have had no teaching model in online instruction and are naïve as to the design and facilitating of online courses (Rogers, Morgan, & Cort, 2018; Schmidt, Tschida, & Hodge,

2016). With teacher training in the online environment, institutions can ensure better success of students in the online course environment by helping instructors become confident and qualified instructors.

From student interviews, instructors need to be trained in communication skills, being personable to students, and how to develop courses that are easy to follow and simple to navigate. Helping teachers build these skills will help them be successful instructors of online courses and possibly keep students enrolled in courses. In order to help these instructors, skilled and seasoned mentors are necessary to help instructors through the challenges they will encounter.

Mentoring. Schmidt, Tschida, and Hodge (2016) discovered that the best method of helping instructors gain confidence was to assign them a mentor within their discipline who could answer questions and help them in the development and implementation of their courses. This was found to be more helpful than a team of technology experts who had no training in teaching others and knew nothing about the discipline an instructor may be teaching. This type of mentoring program naturally encourages accountability of instructors to a mentor.

Instructor accountability. Regardless of instructor determination and integrity, accountability is a method often used to encourage faculty to maintain the benchmarks expected by administration. If there are expectations along with accountability, the skills necessary to help students be successful in the online format will most likely be implemented in the courses being taught. This is important since many students in developmental asynchronous online courses struggle, based on what they believe, is lack of active teacher involvement in their courses. If university administration expects excellence and tracks instructor performance in the online environment, instructors will likely follow the expectations required by the university.

Implications for Instructors

Based on the interviews of those who have been enrolled in past developmental asynchronous online courses, the instructor is the impetus behind their success or frustration, leading to either persistence or attrition. Although student motivation and institutional expectations for instructors both play significant roles in helping students succeed in a course, the instructor's involvement is at the heart, encouraging success or generating student struggles.

Students interviewed in this study had many developmental asynchronous online course scenarios where they expressed both satisfaction and aggravation with their classes. Most of their stories revolved around the instructors and their engagement during the semester. Student descriptions focused around three themes: communication by the instructor, how personal the instructor was with students, and course design and implementation. Each of these three themes, prompted by the instructor, could improve student motivation as well as fulfill many institutional course expectations by instructors. When hearing the stories from students, they were quick to offer their suggestions of what an instructor could do to improve their courses, keep students content, and therefore involved and enrolled to course completion.

Instructor communication. Of the thirty students interviewed in this study, 100 percent believed that communication was the most important theme instructors could establish in the online environment. They believed that communication showed them the instructor cared for them and desired their success as students. When asked what specific suggestions might be helpful to an instructor seeking to build communication with students, they suggested that instructors need to post weekly announcements or create a weekly video to create instructor presence and make it a priority to answer student questions thoroughly and in a timely manner.

Instructor presence through contact with students. Because of the online format, both instructors and students must understand the necessity of regular contact in order to provide a successful experience for all involved. Student comments about instructor presence were summed up by Chase, who said, "I think the instructor is going to make or break the class. If the instructor isn't going to reach out and deal with issues, or let us know he is there for us, he isn't teaching and we aren't learning all we can."

Instructors can improve their presence in the online setting through the implementation of regular communication. This communication can best be done by providing weekly emails, announcements, or videos to encourage students, address common questions, and further explain upcoming assignments. The time spent communicating with students on a regular basis takes little time but is much appreciated by students. Mia's thoughts of her best instructor were, "Her weekly emails and videos made it easy to tell that she enjoyed what she was doing in the course. I could hear it in her voice and read it in her emails. She enjoyed teaching people and that made me enjoy learning from her."

Answer student questions. In the developmental asynchronous online setting, students are often taking their first online course and are intimidated and confused with the subject area as well as the medium of online learning. They have lots of questions before and during the course that must be answered to help them be successful. Student comments from interviews were summed up with Emily's thoughts, "If a student comes to an instructor for help, they need to respond to them, and in a timely manner. I get frustrated when this doesn't happen and feel more confident with what I am doing when it does happen."

For instructors, there really is no need for training as to how and when to answer questions. It is a decision an instructor makes with every student question; they will either

answer the question quickly and thoroughly, or not. From a student perspective, a quality instructor makes it a priority to answer questions carefully and promptly. In Brittany's interview, she expressed her frustration with an instructor who did not communicate with her;

> I feel that some instructors don't want to be bothered, you know, they teach online for a reason. They don't want to help. Some of them shouldn't be teachers. I think they have to be on alert more and should be available and available for anything. One instructor sticks out, and that was horrible for me, she had us buy the book, then were like, 'here you go' I had never had any experience like that....being told to teach yourself and figure it out. And I didn't do well, in fact about midway through I just gave up. If I could teach myself, it would be awesome, but that's not how it works for me. I was hung out to dry and she wasn't there. I would email her a lot and tell her I was stuck on something, and I would email her and she would either not get back to me within a matter of days or just quit responding to me after a while. And so I kind of felt like she wasn't there to instruct me...and I failed.

As students told their stories, their focus was on the importance of communication by the instructor. This communication was specifically aimed at regular communication with students as well as completeness and promptness in communication.

Personable instructors. Good communication is an opportunity for students to be successful in online courses, but it can also be the means to help instructors be more personable with students. Over 70 percent of those interviewed in this study claimed that an instructor who was personable through online communication helped them be more successful in their online course. Students felt a sense of comfort in the class when instructors cared about and understood student struggles both in and out of the classroom environment. Students mentioned that when

the instructor shared who they were and were sensitive to those who struggled with discouragement and confidence, it helped them succeed in class.

Instructors and students as people. Instructors make the choice as to how personal they become with their students. Some share about themselves and some are guarded and keep what they consider, a professional distance, between themselves and their students. When interviewing students, the consensus was for instructors to be personable with who they are beyond a course instructor as well as being interested in the student's life outside the course setting. Elyssa felt that an instructor who is personable is very important for her and shared;

> I definitely like someone who is personable so I feel more comfortable asking questions. One instructor I had would only email and was like this person who just graded my papers and that's all I knew about them. There was no face to the name. It was fine, but I felt like I was intruding when I asked a question.

Following Elyssa's comment, Randy said;

> My A&P prof was really smart, but didn't talk down to us and she was very engaging. She would talk about the course, but then throw in things that were personal and made you feel that you were in a classroom. I felt that I formed a relationship with her. If you form a relationship with your instructor, you can say, 'I feel like an idiot and I don't understand.' And she's OK with that.

In order for instructors to build a relationship with students, it is necessary for them to be "professionally transparent" with students. This type of transparency allows the instructor to share who they are outside the classroom setting yet keep a professional distance at the same time. Sharing hobbies, interests, and life journeys using an "about me" page or video is an important approach to help students better know the instructor without revealing personal life

issues that shouldn't be shared with students. This suggestion was made by several students who were interviewed, including Elyssa who said, "When I get a video introducing the class and themselves, it made me realize that this was an actual human being who wanted me to pass the course and wasn't doing it for just the money."

Instructors can also improve the personable atmosphere of the online setting by responding to student questions with light-hearted and informal replies. This helps students feel more relaxed with the instructor-student relationship and puts students at ease when course difficulties arise.

Understanding life's difficulties. Instructors who are personable, want to know about their students' lives outside the classroom which allows them to better understand life's struggles throughout the semester. Raegan especially felt this was important and stated, "I know that school is voluntary and you have to devote the time to it, but some folks have kids and jobs and life happens and it's always nice when teachers care, understand, and are willing to be helpful when life's problems come up." When an instructor takes the initiative and asks about a student's missing work or lack of involvement in the class, they may find that the student is struggling with difficulties outside the academic environment and may appreciate not only the instructor's compassion, but also opportunities to help the student get back on track in the class.

Although instructors would like students to place a priority on their coursework, students look at their classes as one of the many important obligations of their lives. This means that when life struggles arise, these issues often take precedence over academics putting their course work on hold (Cochran, Campbell, Baker, & Leeds, 2013; Helms, 2014; McMahon, 2013). When instructors respond to student difficulties with compassion, or as Caleb calls "grace", the student knows the instructor cares about them as a person rather than only as a student who

should be getting work turned in on time regardless of life circumstances. By being personable, students interviewed believed the instructors who understood their struggles and other life priorities helped them be more comfortable and satisfied in the online environment.

As instructors seek to understand and then respond with compassion to student life issues yet uphold the standards by holding students accountable, they maintain their expectations and integrity as an instructor, yet are a vital piece to the student's success.

Creating a course design that is simple and easy to follow. As instructors learn better ways to communicate with students as well as viable methods to be personable in the online environment, students feel encouraged to work through the difficulties they may encounter in the course. But frustration is still an issue for these students if the course design is confusing and assignments are difficult to understand. In the face-to-face classroom, assignments are given and explained with questions being answered along the way. In the online environment, it is not possible for the same type of discourse. Therefore, instructors must make instructions clear and easy to follow so students can independently understand expectations and feel comfortable and confident as they work on the lessons during the semester. Aggravation with the course design and the difficulty in understanding the instructions was shared by many students. Tristan's frustration was echoed by many when she said;

> There was so much work. People were asking each other on the discussion board if they had contact with the teacher and if they knew what he was talking about and no one had much contact or any idea what was going on. The course was confusing. We did the discussion board topics and asked questions, but he never responded to anyone's stuff.

In the online environment, students do not have the privilege of interrupting the instructor to ask for further explanation or clarity on an assignment. They are at the mercy of whether the

instructor responds to their emails or texts. Students in these developmental asynchronous online courses are often at a disadvantage because of low self-confidence and motivational struggles (Gaytan, 2015) and as Jill said, "I am intimidated and afraid and I need a prof who helps me through my struggles." Therefore, in order for students in developmental asynchronous online courses to be confident in the work they do, they must fully understand the assignments and the expectations. This can only be done when the course is designed in a way that is both simple and easy to follow without compromising the need for students to be challenged.

Simplify course navigation. Before a course begins, instructors have either developed, or become familiar with the course designed and set up by the university. This is the opportunity for instructors to make sure the course is simple for student navigation. A key concern when creating a course or inspecting a pre-designed course for ease in navigation is to remember that some students have never been enrolled in an online course and may not be familiar with the technology they will be expected to use.

It is important for instructors to plan a course so students can access the week's work in one place and see all that is necessary for the week. This offers students the security in knowing that once the work is done in that week's unit, they have completed their lessons and are not missing anything. Jill confirmed this when she talked about how course organization at the beginning of the class is what made her feel confident in taking her first courses. Jovee struggled with a complicated course structure, and out of frustration, she talked about the fear of missing assignments because there were so many file folders linked to other file folders with articles to read, respond to, and submit. She recalled that some assignments were optional, and some were required and it was so overwhelming at times she did not know what was required and what was for her own learning benefit. She suggested that the instructor look at the course from the

perspective of a naïve student to decide if course navigation could be simplified. If the goal is to help students succeed in the online learning environment while challenging them to learn and grow in the subject area, then the course structure must be designed so students can focus on the content and assignments rather than struggle through the frustration of the course structure. A common phrase students used when discussing their frustration with complicated courses was that "technology should never be the factor that determines whether I am successful in a class".

A successful method to help students navigate a course at the start of a semester is for instructors to prepare a video which directs and explains to students, how to find their way around the course. A screen video recorder like Screencastify allows instructors the ability to record their computer screen while at the same time, verbally give direction using a cursor to navigate the website. It is also an opportunity for students to see their instructor in a small window at the bottom of the screen. This method of instruction helps students watch and listen to the instructor sharing details of the course and is available for them to view throughout the semester. Once the video is made, it can easily be sent to students via email prior to the start of the course. Students commented that when this was done in previous courses, they not only felt connected with the instructor, but felt more confident with the course setup before the course even began.

Follow a routine. Although the thought of a course following a routine may seem monotonous, students interviewed want to have the consistency and familiarity of their courses. They believe the consistency gives them regular due dates and helps them focus on completing assignments rather than trying to figure out each new assignment requirement. Bethany commented that she struggled with the lack of assignment consistency from week to week and this inconsistency kept her confused throughout the semester. She said that by the time she got,

what she called, "the rhythm down", things would change. Brittany added that she had an instructor who would change assignment requirements and due dates as well as when assignments would be available to work on.

Students who were frustrated with the lack of a routine in their courses suggested that instructors maintain consistency throughout the semester. For example, discussion board posts should always be due on the same day each week and challenging assignments should be due the last night of the week so students have time to complete them. They also suggested that assignments be made available the first day of each week. Charis was especially unhappy when instructors would randomly make assignments available midweek rather than at the beginning of the week. Her comment was;

> In one class, sometimes the instructor wouldn't post work until Wednesday and it was due Sunday. I just lost two days of working on it when they did that. It really caused me panic since I felt I only had half as much time to do the assignment…and I never knew which weeks they were going to do that.

As the instructor prepares for the semester, there should be a focus on maintaining a consistent routine for students. This is especially helpful for those in developmental asynchronous online courses since students enrolled in these classes, are as Jill said, "…just beginning our journey with classes and we are confused and nervous and don't want to miss any assignments, so consistency is important, especially at the beginning."

Be thorough in assignment directions. It is not only important to have a clear and organized course site for students to easily understand as well as a weekly routine for assignments, it is also important to have assignment instructions simple in their descriptions. Students interviewed often commented that easy to understand assignment instructions gave

them the support they needed to correctly do the assignment and feel successful in their course. It also allowed students to complete the assignment without having to ask the instructor questions that would often never be answered.

Written instructions. One method students appreciated when given instructions for an assignment were written examples of what the completed assignment should resemble. Charis summed this up when she said, "I think if she would have given us examples, that would have helped, but she just expected us to get it with no ideas along the way." It is also important for instructors to thoroughly describe what a student is expected to do on an assignment. Oftentimes this means letting someone outside the course read the directions for an assignment to make sure expectations are clear.

Video instructions. With so many options available, instructors can easily create a video describing details of an assignment. This allows them to share examples and talk through complications that may come up when students begin working on completing the assignment. Videos are very helpful because it allows the instructor to be present with students as he walks them through the assignment.

Limitations

Readers should use caution when generalizing the results and implications from this study. The participants in this study were not racially representative and were self-selected from the University of Alaska and eager to be a part of this study, therefore possibly skewing the results.

Students interviewed for this study were current students at University of Alaska who had been enrolled in at least one developmental asynchronous online course. No students involved had dropped out of college completely. This means that all interviews were done with students

who continued with their education despite challenges. Therefore, the perspective from students who had left college is missing from the results.

Also, researcher bias may have been present in this study. Although steps were taken to be nonpartial when coding the data, past experiences as an online instructor and student may have affected the analysis of the data. As a previous student in the online environment, it is possible that many of the frustrations and struggles from this experience may have subconsciously been brought into the data analysis. Knowing this was a possible hindrance, preventative steps such as member checks were put in place to help reduce bias. Also, because many interviewees were enrolled in previous courses taught, there is the risk that students answered questions without being completely honest.

Lastly, because writing the interview questions, interviewing, and data coding require skill and practice, the study could be limited by the lack of research expertise. It is possible the open-ended semi-structured questions created for the interviews did not capture the answers that best represented student life experiences in online courses. Along with limited ability in developing interview questions, there is the possibility that the analysis of the data may be incorrect when reporting results because of a lack of experience in data analysis.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study provided findings by students that shed light not only about the frustration and possible attrition of students in developmental asynchronous online courses, but also what students believe is necessary to help them be persistent and finish courses. However, there is still much research that can be done to find solutions to the problem of attrition in this specific online environment.

Non-completers

It is suggested that interviews in future research include students who no longer attend college classes because they dropped out. The students interviewed for this study, regardless of frustrations and challenges were motivated to continue their courses of study. This means the study centered around students who were determined to continue with their education despite struggles. It would be prudent to study the group of students who dropped out of college to determine if their perspectives correlate with those who remained enrolled.

Diverse Population

This study's demographics show that those interviewed were not an accurate representation of students attending the University of Alaska. For example, 83% of students interviewed were female, whereas the University of Alaska is represented by 58% female students (UA Institutional Research, Planning, and Analysis University of Alaska, 2018). Also, racial diversity of those interviewed was considerably different than the student population of the university. Future research should consider a sample population consistent with the diversity of the university.

Community College Students

Nationwide, the attrition rates and demographics of those attending community colleges is much different than at 4-year institutions (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). Therefore, it would be profitable for future research to specifically study student satisfaction and its connection to attrition at community colleges specifically in developmental asynchronous online courses.

Conclusion

With the high attrition rates of students enrolled in developmental asynchronous online courses, a qualitative, phenomenological study was used to better understand the lived experiences of students previously and currently enrolled. The intent of this study was to hear the student voice to discover the causes of student dissatisfaction and what solutions they suggest to retain students.

One of the most significant factors discovered, leading to student struggles in developmental asynchronous online courses, was instructor presence in the course. If the instructor fails at communicating often with students, is impersonable and distant, and uses a curriculum that is confusing and difficult to navigate and understand, students become aggravated and discouraged, often leading to dropping out of the course. When students make the decision to drop out of a course, it has far-reaching consequences that affect both the institution and the student's future goals.

Because of the negative affect attrition has on universities, administration must examine their online programs to ensure a high-quality online environment for students. This includes instructors being expected to provide quality and timely communication, knowing their students, and providing a curriculum that is easy to navigate with clear instructions for assignments. This can be done through instructor training, providing a mentoring program within disciplines, and holding instructors accountable for each course taught.

Additionally, instructors who make teacher presence a priority in the course may help build motivation in students. This can have a far-reaching effect on the success of students and possibly help students complete their educational goals.

The findings in this study recognize that while some students may withdraw from courses for reasons beyond the control of the university and instructor, universities would be wise to increase opportunities for student success by working with instructors to encourage student commitment and course persistence.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Initial Letter to Students

Date:

Dear Student,

I am working on my doctor's degree at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and am doing research with students who take classes online. I am especially interested in students who have taken classes to better prepare them for future college classes. Many students don't finish these classes and I want to find out why and if anything can be done to help them.

I am writing to you because you have taken an online class with me in the past and I feel that your experience can be helpful. You may be able to help me understand why students drop out of these classes.

There is no expected harm to you by helping me with this study and the information you provide will be private. Your answers to questions, both recorded and written, will be stored and won't be seen by anyone but me. You will receive no benefits for helping me with this study, but your ideas may be helpful to other instructors as they teach their classes.

What You Will Be Asked to Do:
If you choose to help, there are three parts you will be asked to help with:

1. Fill out an online questionnaire (time commitment: 15-30 minutes).
2. Join me in an online recorded interview using an app called Zoom! (time commitment: 30-45 minutes).
3. Be involved in an online interview using the app, Zoom! with other students to discuss your experiences in your online classes. (time commitment: 1-1.5 hours).

Also, you can withdraw from this study at any time for any reason with no questions asked. It is completely voluntary to help me with my study.

If you are interested in taking part in this study, please reply to this email for further instructions. Students who complete all three parts above will be entered for a drawing for one of three $50 Amazon gift cards.

Kindest Regards,

Gary Leiter
Ph.D. Candidate
University of Alaska Fairbanks

Appendix B

Researcher Follow Up to Initial Letter

Date:

Dear Student,

Thank you for volunteering to be a part of this research. I realize that by being involved, you are committing valuable time and it is very much appreciated. To show my appreciation for the time you are committing, there will be a drawing at the end of the research for three, $50 Amazon gift cards.

The first step is to fill out an online survey using SurveyMonkey to provide demographic information such as age, education level, income, etc. and brief answers to questions. Each of your experiences in developmental online courses will be very helpful to my research and I am looking forward to reading your responses.

What will happen next: You will receive an email with a link to the survey. When you click on the link, you will be taken to SurveyMonkey. The first page will be a consent form with "yes" or "no" buttons at the bottom. If you choose "yes", you will continue with the survey, if you choose "no", the survey is over, and you are done.

Again, thanks so much for giving up some of your valuable time to help with this research.

Kindest Regards,

Gary Leiter

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form using SurveyMonkey

Instructor-student relationships and attrition rates among students enrolled in developmental asynchronous online classes

IRB #1369693-1

Date Approved:

Dear,

I am working on my doctor's degree at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and am doing research with students who take classes online. I am interested in students who have taken classes to better prepare them for future college classes. Many students don't finish these classes and I want to find out why and if anything can be done to help them.

I am writing to you because you have taken an online class with me in the past and I feel that your experience can be helpful. You may be able to help me understand why students drop out of these classes.

There is no expected harm to you by helping me with this study and the information you provide will be private. Your answers to questions, both recorded and written, will be stored and won't be seen by anyone but me. You will receive no benefits for helping me with this study, but your ideas may be helpful to other instructors as they teach their classes.

What You Will Be Asked to Do:
If you choose to help, there are three parts you will be asked to help with:

1. Fill out an online questionnaire (time commitment: 15-30 minutes).
2. Join me in an online recorded interview using an app called Zoom! (time commitment: 30-45 minutes).
3. Be involved in an online interview using the app, Zoom! with other students to discuss your experiences in your online classes. (time commitment: 1-1.5 hours).

Also, you can withdraw from this study at any time for any reason with no questions asked. It is completely voluntary to help me with my study.

If you are interested in taking part in this study, please reply to this email for further instructions. Students who complete all three parts above will be entered for a drawing for one of three $50 Amazon gift cards.

If you have questions, feel free to contact me at gleiter@alaska.edu or 805-801-8055 or my Ph.D. committee chairman, Dr. Susan Renes at slrenes@alaska.edu.

The UAF Institutional Review Board (IRB) is a group that checks research projects involving people. This review is done to protect the rights and welfare of people involved the research. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you can contact the UAF Office of Research Integrity at 474-7800 (Fairbanks area) or 1-866-876-7800 (toll-free outside the Fairbanks area) or uaf-irb@alaska.edu

Statement of Consent:
I understand what was described above. My questions have been answered, and I agree to be a part of this study. I am 18 years old or older.

Do you agree with the terms? By clicking Yes, you consent that you are willing to answer the questions in this survey.

Kindest Regards,

Gary Leiter
Ph.D. Candidate
University of Alaska Fairbanks

Appendix D

Student Demographic Survey

Below are several statements to collect background information from students who have been enrolled in University of Alaska's online developmental courses. Your name and email address will only be used by the researcher to contact you for the one-to-one interview. Your personal information and interview answers will never be connected to your name in any data presented in this research.

Name:

Email address:

1. What is your age?

- 22 or under
- 23-30
- 31-40
- 41-50
- 51 or older
- Prefer not to answer

How many semesters of college classes have you taken?

- 1-2
- 3-4
- 5-6
- 7 or more
- Prefer not to answer

How many semesters of online college classes have you taken?

- 1
- 2
- 3 or more

How would you describe yourself?

- Asian/Pacific Islander
- Alaska Native
- Caucasian/White
- Hispanic
- African American
- Other
- Prefer not to answer

What is your current relationship status?

- Single
- Married
- Separated
- Divorced
- Widowed
- Prefer not to answer

What is the approximate population of your town?

- 0-50
- 51-100
- 101-250
- 251-500
- 501-1000
- 1001-5000
- 5001-10,000
- More than 10,000
- Prefer not to answer

If you live in Alaska, is your town accessible by the Alaska road system?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

How much time do you spend using the Internet for your college classes?

- Less than one hour each day
- Anywhere from one to two hours per day
- between two and five hours per day
- lots, probably five to eight hours per day
- Almost always, over eight hours per day
- Prefer not to answer

How many children under the age of 18 live in your household?

- None
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4 or more
- Prefer not to answer

Pick all the following that apply to your present status.

Employed for wages

- Self-employed
- Student
- Homemaker
- Unemployed
- Military
- Retired
- Unable to work
- Prefer not to answer

Approximately how many total hours do you spend <u>each week</u> completing work for your college classes and/or studying for all college classes.

- 0-3
- 4-6
- 7-9
- 10-12
- 13-15
- 16-18
- more than 18 hours each week
- Prefer not to answer
- Other

Appendix E

One-to-One Interview Questions

1. What would you consider to be the biggest struggle for students taking online courses? What other struggles do students have who take online courses?
2. Looking back at past online courses you have taken; what did the instructor(s) do, or not do, to communicate with students?
3. Describe any drawbacks or difficulties you have had in your online course(s).
    a. What did you or your instructor do to try solving these difficulties?
    b. What role did you and/or instructor play in bringing about these difficulties?
4. How might an instructor keep a student from dropping or giving up in an online course??
5. How would you describe a healthy student/instructor relationship in the online environment?
6. A good student/instructor relationship is necessary in an online course, what can instructors do to encourage this relationship?
7. If you dropped or quit doing the work for an online course, what happened to bring you to this point?
8. If you have taken an online course where you had a good experience, what were the specific things that made it so?

Appendix F

Coding Process Example

Step 2; Meaning Units

Figure it out, Gave up, I can't teach myself, She wasn't there for me, Hung out to dry, email and get no response, not a thorough response when she did, communication is the key, understood my struggles, was there to help, fear of no help, online courses are set up poorly, no immediate answers, due dates all over the place, often confused with instructions, instructor doesn't want to be bothered, relationships are important, they have to be available, don't care about personal issues at home, cold relationship, no bond, they care when there are good instructions, weekly videos help a lot, randomly assigned work, I felt cheated.

Step 3; Manageable Themes

Theme 1: Communication: email and get no response, not a thorough response when she did write, communication is the key, they have to be available

Theme 2: Personable: need to understand my struggles, relationships are important, cold relationship

Theme 3: Course Design: the course was set up poorly, due dates all over the place, confusing instructions, weekly videos would be nice, randomly assigned work

Theme 4: Care about Students: she wasn't there for me, didn't care about personal issues, no bond

Theme 5: To Succeed: felt cheated, I can't teach myself

Theme 6: Helpful: figure it out, fear of no help, doesn't want to be bothered, need to be there to help

Theme 7: Response time: no immediate answers to questions

Step 4; Textural Descriptions

Brittany characterized her experience in one of her classes as feeling alone. She felt that the instructor never really cared about whether she succeeded or failed and proved this by her lack of communication and poor course design. Her bad experience began the first day of class when she was confused with the syllabus, wrote to the instructor, and received little response. She stated, "I would ask for help and she wouldn't respond or she would respond with one answer on one of my questions, but that wouldn't get me very far." She kept trying to contact her instructor about other questions, but felt like she was annoying the instructor. Brittany's thoughts were, "I felt that she didn't want to be bothered....that's why she was teaching online, so I just gave up."

As the semester went on, Brittany never felt comfortable with the instructor. Her feelings of dissatisfaction with the instructor grew with every ignored question she asked. She said, "She had us buy the book, then was like, "'Here you go' and didn't really teach us anything. I had never had any experience like that….being told to teach yourself and figure it out. And I didn't do well, in fact about midway through I just gave up. I followed the book which had steps and that was great, but you know, I don't learn that way. If I could teach myself, it would be awesome, but that's not how it works for me. I was hung out to dry and she wasn't there....she didn't care."

Brittany gave up on the class and quit. She really needed the class for her degree, but she just couldn't do it with an instructor who made her feel like she had no value. Here struggles consisted of having no communication, not feeling that the instructor cared about her as a person, being confused with the instructions for assignments, and not receiving any help along the way. These struggles all added up to feeling isolated and disrespected.

Step 5; Structural Descriptions

Brittany was skeptical and a bit fearful about taking an online course because she had heard horror stories about how distant students felt when taking them. But, the face-to-face course was full, so she settled for the online course. Her trouble began right away when she discovered that in the online environment, communication is imperative to being successful. When she received no response to her initial or ongoing questions, she knew she would not be able to pass the course. Her initial fears of online courses were realized. She felt that she was not only alone in her struggles, but had no one to talk to about them. Was she all alone in this struggle? Did others do fine and she just wasn't smart enough to understand what she was supposed to do? These questions kept haunting her and she began to hate the online environment more each day.

Her feelings about online courses ended with, "Through a computer screen, you don't even know what that person looks like or what they're about other than their assignments, I think it builds a cold relationship where is seems like a transaction rather than a teacher-student kind of relationship. So yeah it's different online….there is no bond like being in the classroom. And in this course, I just quit."

Brittany's experience with online courses makes her very hesitant to try another one. What if the instructor doesn't communicate? What if I have a question about the lesson? How will I know if I will run into the same problem or not? Is an online course just a waste of money since I may have to quit again? With such a bad experience with online courses, Brittany has tried to stay away from them since her questions can't be answered until she attempts another course with another instructor.

Appendix G

Institutional Review Board Approval Letters

(907) 474-7800
(907) 474-5444 fax
uaf-irb@alaska.edu
www.uaf.edu/irb

Institutional Review Board

909 N Koyukuk Dr. Suite 212, P.O. Box 757270, Fairbanks, Alaska 99775-7270

February 19, 2019

To:	Susan Renes, Ph.D. Principal Investigator
From:	University of Alaska Fairbanks IRB
Re:	[1369693-1] Instructor-Student Relationships and Attrition Rates Among Students Enrolled in Developmental Asynchronous Online Courses

Thank you for submitting the New Project referenced below. The submission was handled by Expedited Review under the requirements of 45 CFR 46.110, which identifies the categories of research eligible for expedited review.

Title:	Instructor-Student Relationships and Attrition Rates Among Students Enrolled in Developmental Asynchronous Online Courses
Received:	February 4, 2019
Expedited Category:	7
Action:	APPROVED
Effective Date:	February 19, 2019
Expiration Date:	February 19, 2020

This action is included on the March 6, 2019 IRB Agenda.

No changes may be made to this project without the prior review and approval of the IRB. This includes, but is not limited to, changes in research scope, research tools, consent documents, personnel, or record storage location.

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Institutional Review Board

909 N Koyukuk Dr. Suite 212, P.O. Box 757270, Fairbanks, Alaska 99775-7270

May 20, 2019

To:	Susan Renes, Ph.D. Principal Investigator
From:	University of Alaska Fairbanks IRB
Re:	[1369693-4] Instructor-Student Relationships and Attrition Rates Among Students Enrolled in Developmental Asynchronous Online Courses

Thank you for submitting the Revision referenced below. The submission was handled by Expedited Review under the requirements of 45 CFR 46.110, which identifies the categories of research eligible for expedited review.

Title:	Instructor-Student Relationships and Attrition Rates Among Students Enrolled in Developmental Asynchronous Online Courses
Received:	May 20, 2019
Expedited Category:	7
Action:	APPROVED
Effective Date:	May 20, 2019
Expiration Date:	February 19, 2020

This action is included on the June 5, 2019 IRB Agenda.

No changes may be made to this project without the prior review and approval of the IRB. This includes, but is not limited to, changes in research scope, research tools, consent documents, personnel, or record storage location.